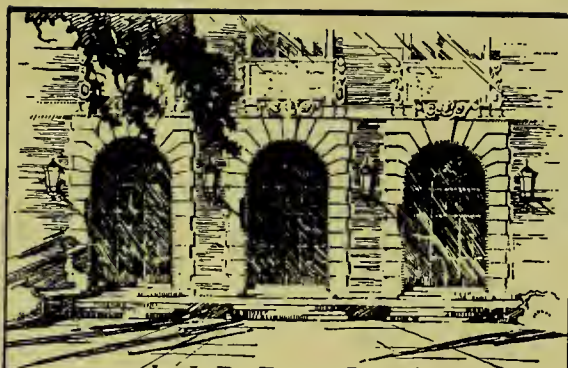






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BETHESDA



B E T H E S D A

BY

BARBARA ELBON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME II.

London

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PART I.

(*CONTINUED.*)

CHAPTER XII.

‘Is there naught better than to enjoy ?
No deed which, done, will make time break,
Letting us pent-up creatures through
Into eternity, our due,—
No forcing earth teach heaven’s employ ?’
ROBERT BROWNING.

THE next day was Sunday, a balmy beautiful day. Everywhere was the atmosphere of festivity which characterises a Continental Sabbath. All the world intended to take the fullest enjoyment from the mild May *fête*, and Mrs. Trescott and Bethesda were going to do the same. It had become a custom to them to be out-of-doors all the pleasant Sundays with M. d’Isten, who was then free, and delighted to devote his whole time to them. Often they went to church to hear high mass,—Mrs. Trescott yielding the

American chapel because there was a clergyman there she disliked,—and then wandered out into the country, or to some of the pleasure-grounds which are numerous in Paris, taking a light luncheon where they could find it, and sharing an innocent gaiety with the people of the great city.

Sometimes they spent the long sunny hours in a country ramble, driving out fairly beyond the city, and then strolling through the woods, or idling under the trees, or visiting rural farm-houses ; many of which were afterwards sent intact to America by Bethesda's pen. To-day, however, it had been previously arranged that they were to go to church ; and, after a luminous night's rest, when she never fell so soundly asleep but that she was conscious of an unusual brightness in her mind, Beth rose and took her coffee alone. It was not until the morning was well advanced that her aunt appeared.

‘ Well, chérie, how is it this morning ? Have you been up writing since daybreak ? ’

‘Not quite, auntie ; one does not need to rise so very early to be ahead of you !’

‘*Impertinente !* But what have you written ? Won’t you read it to me ?’

Bethesda paused a moment, and turned over the pages thoughtfully before she replied :

‘Yes, if you like.’

‘I would very much like to hear it,’ said Mrs. Trescott, seating herself opposite Beth.

She watched her, trying to see between the lines, while she listened to the earnest tones in which the young woman read what she had written before she slept. Bethesda finally looked up with a somewhat solemn bravery in her eyes as she pronounced the words :

‘I accept the compact.’

Mabel’s face was curiously tender and admiring.

‘So,’ she said, with a long breath which seemed of relief, ‘you have decided. I hope it will prove all you think it, darling.’ After a

moment she added: 'I wish René could see that.'

'What!' exclaimed Beth, flushing.

'I do; all but the very last, at any rate. It would make him understand, and appreciate you even better than he does.'

'Do you think the last is wrong?' asked Bethesda, with a searching glance.

'No; not wrong. Sorrowful, maybe, sweetheart.'

She put her hand on Beth's lap, and the girl took it in both her own.

'If it is not wrong, I won't find it sorrowful, rest assured, auntie. It is a greater richness than most women have in their lives. Besides, that is only an extreme case, which I never should have thought about if you had not suggested it.'

She met her aunt's fond gaze with open sunniness.

'You must be married some day, dear,' said Mabel; 'but for me—alack the day.'

‘You wouldn’t be sorry if this kept me beside you?’ asked Beth archly.

‘Yes, yes; I don’t want you to remain unmarried. It is not a happy life.’

Here the sound of a knock on the parlour door disturbed them.

‘It is M. d’Isten!’ exclaimed Bethesda. ‘We are late.’

He had come to see, he said, if they still had the desire to go to church? Thanks, he would not come in.

‘You wish to go, Beth?’ asked Mrs. Trescott.

‘Indeed I do, greatly,’ was the answer.

‘*La petite dévote!*’ said René, smiling, and left them.

The Madeleine was full when they arrived. M. d’Isten took them in by a side entrance, and Mabel was seated on one side of the small door, Bethesda and M. d’Isten on the other.

Bethesda had brought her little Imitation, with the prayers in the front and directions for

joining in the mass. It was one M. d'Isten had given her. She was in a devout mood ; she felt an unwonted drawing towards religion. There was a deep yearning for communion with One all-seeing and all-mighty ; with One who could guide her, absolutely, to the best. Conscience began to tremble as life pressed upon her with new thoughts and new questions. Bethesda had yet to learn that abstract right is above any conscience, and that it we must obey. Principle was not yet developed in her. The instincts of her nature were true and noble, but the quivering needle of a compass is not more unsteady in comparison to the polar star, than conscience in comparison to principle. Let some iron force, or some electric current, come, and the index hand would point far from due north. Even at the best sailors are obliged to make allowances for the nails in their own ships, as well as a thousand larger things, before they can rely upon their compasses ; and the bias of one's own

nature, beside the many influences of heredity and education, makes one's conscience a very fallible guide.

But this was all unrecognised, and Bethesda only felt the tendency which caused her to lend herself reverently to the solemn rites performed before her. She and M. d'Isten knelt and rose together; he looked over the tiny book she held, and read what she read; occasionally he caught her eyes. They were full of a deep wistfulness; now soothed by a strengthening line, now awed by the mysterious majesty of the music, and the sacrifice offered at the altar.

These symbols appealed to her profoundly, but she could not grasp a single satisfying idea. They soared around her, above her, like the music; they escaped her as the incense would have done had she tried to hold it; there was nothing she could touch, nothing she could make hers.

Again the question came to her: M. d'Isten

was a Catholic, could he really hold fast by this?

She looked up straight and full into his eyes. The glance startled him ; he did not understand what it meant. Here was a side of her nature which, with all his quick perceptions, he could not read.

Her eyes fell, disappointed. She turned over a few pages of her book without noticing them. Then these words caught her eyes :

‘ By two wings man is lifted up from things earthly : Simplicity and purity. Simplicity ought to be in our intention ; purity in our affection. Simplicity doth seek God ; purity doth find and apprehend Him.’

‘ See ! ’ she whispered.

Her face was beaming ; her eyes shone with a delicious sweetness. He looked to where she pointed. Why should these words have produced such a transfiguration ? Did she really want God so much ?

He took the book gently, and found a page which he gave her to read.

‘Love is a great thing, yea, a great and thorough good; by itself it makes everything that is heavy light, and it bears with equal serenity all the circumstances of life.

‘Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller nor better in heaven or earth; because love is born of God, and cannot rest but in God, above all His creations.’

Bethesda's eyes were blind with tears when she finished. How well he understood her! If she only could love God. Perhaps she did. It seemed to her that anything would be easy to bear if she could only be sure God existed, so that she might love Him. If she could see Jesus, how gladly she would throw herself at His feet, and kiss them, and weep over them! But God? He was so far away!

She dared not trust herself to look anywhere but on her book, or she might have seen a flash of sudden jealousy on M. d'Isten's face.

‘That is truer to me of my friends than of God,’ he whispered hurriedly.

She did not distinguish the words, for a thunderous peal of the organ just then rolled through the temple. The sudden start shook two big tears on to her cheeks, and when she had brushed them away, and turned her chaste eyes up to him, he had for the moment no desire greater than that she should not know what he had said. Her purity of soul must not be disturbed.

From the church their landau took them out through the Champs Elysées, beyond the Bois, and on into the country, by roads which M. d'Isten's schoolboy days had taught him.

They came finally to a group of trees on a bank above the Seine. The city lay concealed behind them; no house was in sight, but blue

wreaths of smoke beyond a hillock told of a noonday meal. A suburban village was not far off, the coachman said; he would put up his horses there. Marcot was a devoted retainer of M. d'Isten's (the ladies did not know this), and was perfectly reliable. He carried rugs and shawls down to the shady nook by the river, and then drove away.

When he had disappeared there was not a sign of human life but that delicate, treacherous smoke.

M. d'Isten arranged everything in the most convenient manner for the ladies, and then threw himself at their feet with a sigh of content which Bethesda noticed. She had been unusually silent ever since they left the church, but the quietude was of pleasure. These Sundays were delightful holidays to her; how dear they were she did not know until afterwards. Her aunt was in the especial humour for it to-day, and they both enjoyed watching René

d'Isten, whose air of self-possessed distinction never left him, while he relaxed under the influence of nature, and became dreamy and content.

‘What would Madame de la R——, and Mesdemoiselles de St. H——, who suppose you so repressed and unapproachable, think now?’ asked Mabel, smiling at his luxurious sense of *abandon*.

‘Truly it would be a revelation to them,’ answered René, his head on his hand and his eyes reposing on Bethesda’s clasped hands. ‘One does not know me to the depths,’ he continued presently. ‘It is no marvel, for I did not know myself.’

‘Do you think, then, that you know yourself now?’

‘I am learning; you teach me fast.’

He included them both in a quiet glance, and then let his eyes fall to the river sweeping almost silently past their feet. It met with no obstacles to cause it to show its strength.

‘What are you thinking about now?’ asked Mabel idly.

‘My unbuilt castle by the sea,’ he responded, without hesitation. ‘I often visit it. Every stone is as known to me as this stream. The ocean is frothing now around the base of the precipice, for it is calm; but in stormy weather it dashes its spray even to the windows, a hundred and fifty feet above.’

‘Windows. It’s all window there now, isn’t it?’

‘Not in my dreams. The castle, and the chapel, and the lighthouse are built, and inhabited, too, then. Do you know by what name I shall call them?’

‘The last I heard it was as undecided as the rest of it. Some fanciful idea you have now, I suppose?’

She spoke carelessly, but he answered with slow impressiveness:

‘It is a beautiful name; I have chosen it after long consideration. It is—Béthesda.’

‘Not really!’ exclaimed Beth.

‘You will let me?’

‘I could not possibly object,’ she said a little slowly.

‘Do you remember in Florence, Madame Mabelle, when you first told me your niece wrote, and that she used her own name, Béthesda?’

His foreign tongue lent this Hebrew word a sweetness of pronunciation which was not lost on the ladies, and which he seemed pleased to linger over.

‘You said,’ he continued, ‘that she had always associated some meaning, as yet unknown, with her name, and the story in the Holy Bible. Last night I thought of this, and of the beacon I am to build off a dangerous coast. It will guide weary mariners to safety; it will restore hope to the despairing, and they will bless the name it bears. I could think of none so fitted to it as Béthesda. Le Château de Béthesda; la Phare de Béthesda.’

He looked up with the dreaminess of his tone in his dark eyes, and met Bethesda's. They reminded him of some shadowed cove of the shore near his home, where the limpid water lay deep and still, only the tide throbbing far beneath the glinting surface.

'I don't see why, if you are going to build really, you banish yourself to that out-of-the-world coast,' said Mrs. Trescott in a practical tone. 'Why don't you buy a place in Brittany or Normandy, where it would be fashionable, and you could spend the summer months? Madame d'Isten might join you then.'

'She does not like the sea. She prefers her present position to any other.' He gave Mrs. Trescott a glance of reminder, and then continued: 'This is to be my castle; I shall have it for my own. I may not live in it long during the year, but I shall have a consciousness of its existence; of a place that I can go to at any time and be at rest.'

‘What a dreamer you are!’ exclaimed Mabel, somewhat impatiently. ‘You might do a great deal better work with your money. And besides, how are you going to explain giving your “castle” such a fantastic name?’

‘Is it fantastic, madame? However, if persons are inquisitive I shall know how to silence them. To my friends I shall say it is my *nom de plume*, and that I choose to name my castle the same.’

‘Le grand seigneur!’ laughed Mabel. Then sobering: ‘So you will say frankly that “Bethesda” is your *nom de plume*? Shall you tell your wife of this compact? Have you decided to adopt it? You must each think for yourselves, you know. Beth read me this morning what she had written; will you?’

Mrs. Trescott spoke hastily. The subject had been avoided until she seized this opportunity.

‘I will read it to you both one of these days,’ said René. ‘I am resolved upon the compact, if mademoiselle consents, and I am assured she will.’

His eyes met Bethesda's in a sure claiming, and she repeated with the almost solemn gravity with which she had read the words to her aunt :

‘ Yes, I accept the compact.’

René d'Isten sprang to his feet as the words passed her lips, thus giving expression to the bound of soul within him. To such words he could trust ; his aim was reached.

‘ Thank you, Béthesda,’ he said, standing close beside her, and there was an intonation in his voice which Beth presently learned she alone could cause.

Days passed, June came and brooded with a delicious sweetness over land and sea ; over flowers of the earth and flowers of the mind. Nature unclosed, and let the warm sunbeams steal into the furl of every leaf ; white lilacs bloomed and filled all Paris with their perfume ; roses smoothed their creased young petals, and expanded their delicate filaments in rich development. Everything, in fact, was redolent of life,

and shook into the air new vitality, and beauty, and strength.

The compact concluded between René d'Isten and Bethesda drew them more and more intimately together. It was as if an isthmus had been cut away and the waves of two seas were allowed to flow freely into one another. Each hour of intercourse told, by some driftweed of conversation, how far the waters of one had advanced into the other, and every sign spoke of a surprising distance traversed.

Mrs. Trescott felt them gradually receding from her, and towards one another, but was unable to do anything to avert the danger, if danger it was. The isthmus was gone ; nothing was to be done now but watch and wait. It would not be long anyway ; they were to sail in a month or six weeks. She supported herself, meantime, by the belief that two such extraordinary beings as were her niece and her friend could do extraordinary things without ordinary

results ; and ignored the sovereignty of natural laws.

But it was a necessity to her to ‘speak her mind,’ and she did so, both to René and Bethesda. She only spoke, however ; and, in constant references to what might be the dangers to others, let none of their tendencies come upon them with the enlightening shock of surprise, but thus blunted their sensibilities, and helped them to remain, ethically, asleep.

René d’Isten, however, was not wholly asleep. He had recognised very clearly, on the evening of announcing his plan, that it would lead Bethesda and himself to a unity of more than minds. He saw the inevitability of growth in a sprouting plant, unless some one pulled it up by the roots, against which catastrophe he guarded with utmost care. For he did not think it wrong that this beautiful *arbuste* should grow and blossom ; the fruit alone would be wrong to touch. And he had no fears that either of them would be tempted

to touch it. Bethesda was pure as an angel, and he was going to be unlike other men. Had he not been, all his life? Why should he now become commonplace and vulgar, just when all the best in him was stimulated and increased? Bah! it was sacrilege to think of it!

Not one of the three realised the importance of thoughts, how they are only the buds of deeds, and that, even if they never reach fruition, their fragrance may be fatal. Not one of them recognised that it is possible to transgress all the commandments of every school of morality in one's heart, yet keep the outward life irreproachable.

Still the instinct of principle, the moral sense, which responds, as the intellect does not, to the actual right and wrong, will not let one transgress without remonstrance. Night after night Bethesda knelt in her open window, and let the stifled conflict surge within her. If at any time she had known it absolutely to be wrong, she could have summoned strength enough to break off the whole

affair and leave the city. But there was nothing to assure her it was wrong. Her aunt vacillated ; she herself felt the purity of her intentions, and an utter confidence in René ; and he did not speak.

For M. d'Isten was one of those men who did not deceive, he only did not expose. He considered that character which allows its whole self to be seen by any one who cares to look, as a boorish, ungraceful, and almost immoral one. Garments, he would have said, are as necessary to the soul as to the body in civilised society. We cannot go around telling our inmost thoughts, or holding up our hands, that each person may read our fortunes in our palms. Let us drape ourselves as gracefully as may be, and then we will respect ourselves and one another vastly more.

Only, such a man would not say any of this, he would live it ; and this is what others are to see and understand, and guide their own actions accordingly ; and it is also what neither Mabel nor Bethesda did.

CHAPTER XIII.

‘What might have been is sad indeed ;
What should have been is sadder still ;
The happiness our spirits need
Is not of circumstance, but will.’

‘Your pity is the suffering mother of love : its anguish is the very natal pang of the divine passion.’—*Jane Eyre*.

ONE evening, in the second week of their compact, the conversation drifted, or was guided, towards what they were first to write in unison. The letters were already arranged ; in fact, one had been written the previous week, worked up from René’s notes and Beth’s observation into what was really excellent, and pleased Mrs. Trescott hardly less than it did the double Bethesda.

But both were eager to commence something

more notable and continuous ; something they could plan now and execute later.

Bethesda suggested a story.

‘A story it shall be,’ said René, delighted. ‘But what will we treat ? What shall be chosen for the subject ?’

Bethesda gave an outline which she had already sketched.

‘No,’ objected René, with a smile, ‘we must have something original to the new Bethesda. I am going to be very jealous of what you have already thought. Let me give you the germ ; that is my prerogative. Let it be a story based on my life.’

‘But, René ! I never could write that !’

‘Pardon me ; I am convinced no one could do it so well. Besides, I shall help you !’ and he plunged into the scheme with ardour, for autobiography comes easiest to an inexperienced writer.

‘I shall tell you all,’ he said ; ‘I shall give

you my opinion of what has passed, and you can sift them, throw away what is useless, and keep what you can make good. You shall judge me and my actions, and write freely from yourself, as well as from me. It will clarify everything, and let light on the underground world of the past. Come, it will be excellent !'

Was there some hidden reason why he wished her to know him thus intimately ? Or was it only an artist's fervid desire to paint what he knew best ?

Bethesda remembered the secret in his life, and hesitated.

'There must be no concealments,' he resumed, more gravely. 'You shall be my conscience, to dictate where I have done wrong, and where I should alter my conduct in the future. You need say nothing, but put it in the work, and I shall understand. You shall know everything, Bethesda, as I know it myself. If expression fails me, your insight will abundantly com-

pensate. But, above all things, be frank. Do not fear to write as you think; speak as you would to yourself. I shall understand each word, and shall be grateful to you for making my duties easier to perform.'

His voice had fallen into that low and persuasive intonation which ever leaned on the tenderest chords of the woman's heart. Long ago she had said it left her no power, or even wish, to refuse. So she consented, faintly. Her fears for her literary incapacity were mingled with a somewhat weakening premonition of the events she would have to hear. She looked forward to it with an indefinable dread. Could she bear to see him so worked upon as her aunt had described when he brought her from proud anger to tears that first night in Florence, so long, long ago?

But once her consent won, René had resumed his interested manner. He said they must begin immediately; there never was a better time

than the present—when the present was good. She could make her notes now, and he would look them over to see there were no incorrect impressions. He roused her from her passivity by threatening to look through her desk for pencil and note-book, and by the time they were seated, René to talk and the ladies to listen, the three were in thorough harmony.

He spoke with admirable perspicuity and ease; each incident was pointed by that inimitable French faculty of seizing the very arrowhead of thought to which the language lends itself in an unequalled manner. There were many delicately-drawn sketches of scenery, surroundings, and character which Bethesda despaired of reproducing. At first she dotted down this and that fact, a duty of which René had frequently to remind her, until he too became so absorbed that the page before her remained empty.

His father was already a familiar character,

and the little he knew of his mother had been reverently communicated to them. But now, in leading them through the galleries of memory, he could not truthfully refrain from pointing out shadows and sadder pictures which hung there.

They commenced early. He was sent from home when his father remarried, and had first seen France, a shivering child of six, under the care of an old priest who knew nothing of children, and had neglected him during the whole journey. Still, he loved France from the first, why he could hardly say.

‘It must have been in the little boy a feeling such as the maiden had when she wished to kiss the ground at Dieppe,’ said René, smiling at Beth.

The little fellow remained in the school at Paris for eight years, without leaving it even in vacations, and it was only on the occurrence of his sister’s fatal illness that his father sent for

him to come to Algiers. He went, but reached home only in time to see his sister lying at rest among the flowers in her casket; and to wish, for a while, that he might lie there too.

His only possible companion seemed gone in the death of this person, to whom alone, in her frequent visits to Paris, he had been able to speak freely. His step-brothers, educated by their mother to look upon him with envy and dislike, avoided him; his stepmother herself showed a petty spite towards him, and his grief bit deeper and deeper into his heart. But his father, looking up from the blow of the loss of his favourite child, found her little brother in this sorry condition, and from that time the boy was never allowed to leave him when they could possibly be together. René had always felt that his sister's tenderness and his mother's memory went hand in hand with his father's new solicitude.

Two years passed in the delightful inter-

course of a youthful mind with a man in every way superior. An ardent passion soon possessed the boy for his father, who became his world. Gaiety of spirits bloomed, thought developed, independence strengthened, as he felt the desire to make himself an agreeable companion, and a son of whom his father need not be ashamed. Meanwhile he disarmed his stepmother's prejudices, and won his brothers heartily to his side.

At the end of this time his father thought it necessary that he should again take up his studies ; but, unwilling to send him so far away as Paris, he consigned him to a learned monastery by the sea, near the family estates, and in the corner of the Pyrenees which had become so dear to René.

Here he passed a studious thoughtful period, filled with alternate hours of reading and solitary wanderings along the shore, filled with sombre romance, in which the atmosphere of renunciation,

the gray thundering ocean, the majestic rocks, and his wholly introspective life, combined to accentuate the grave cast of character which peculiarly distinguished him.

Of women he knew almost nothing. The memory of his mother and sister had never been deposed—in fact had never been approached. In Paris he had seen no women ; in Algeria the white-garmented and veiled creatures were like wraiths to him ; and during his vacations his stepmother and her coterie were so dissimilar to his tastes that they produced no impression upon him. Perhaps from the cloistered monks, their stories and legends, he had learned more of women than in any other way ; and he had seen none who could for an instant be compared with the ideal being whom saintly stories and lonely musings had formed and almost endowed with life.

On finishing his education his father offered him the choice of travel or Paris. He declined both. He wished to be gradually introduced to

that stream of life which had so long been flowing past his secluded retreat without his knowing more of it than its murmur. So he asked his father to let him go to the town near by to mingle freely in the society then assembled there.

Permission was readily granted. His father wished him to marry young, and advised him to seek a wife, not alone French, but from the Midi, who would be his own from the dearest mutual associations. He told him, however, it behoved him not to be in haste, but to remember his inexperience, his responsibilities, and to consult those wiser than he. Still he appreciated the uses and delights of a youthful marriage, and would have been glad to have his son seek a similar experience to that which had given him his own greatest happiness.

‘Beware of taking a heartless woman, no matter what her charms. Find a wife like your blessed mother, and I ask nothing more for you,’ he said, when they parted.

René immediately set up a bachelor's establishment in T——, and was warmly received in society, where his name was well known, and his father's friends many. He was courted and *fêted*, and introduced at once to all the eligible maidens of the country round.

An elderly marchioness, who had been a life-long friend of his father's, took him especially under her care. To her he spoke freely: he told her that his fixed idea was to find a wife who should be not so much a society queen as a womanly woman; he told her of his hopes and fears, and explained why he did not seek Paris instead of this provincial place, which she pressed him to do. He would have a wider choice there, she urged, and he should 'see Paris' before he settled; he would be better satisfied then.

But his determination was unshakable; he had no desire to know Parisian life; rather, he wished to marry young so that he should have no temptation to ever know it; and moreover, he wished

his wife to be from southern France, with its warmth and devotion, and not a frivolous leader of society.

So the marchioness turned her energies in another direction, and studied all her young acquaintances with the eye of a connoisseur, resolved to find him a suitable wife.

He, meantime, took the matter into his own hands.

At a ball one night he saw a new face, brilliant with warm emotions and joyousness of spirits. She was dancing with a young hussar, and they made a notable couple. He found on inquiry that she was the daughter of a rich Spanish merchant, who had married into a French family ennobled by the first empire. He was ambitious, the world said, and resolved that his daughter should marry at least as high as her mother's rank. To this all her education had tended. She was an only child, carefully reared, accomplished, and beautiful, as he could see. The blood

that ran in her veins was said to make her ambitious also, and the haughty condescension with which she was received by her mother's equals rasped on her unbearably, and it was asserted that her aim was to compel them to a more conciliatory position.

In spite of these rumours René d'Isten, interested by her face, and indignant at her undeserved humiliation, sought an introduction. He was welcomed with *empressement*. The father was flattered, the mother pleased; the daughter did not seem to object to his advances. But the marchioness was seriously alarmed.

She summoned René to her, and at the very first remonstrated strongly. Here was not the woman to make him a domestic wife, to answer his devotion with affection, to chain him with new ties of sweetness to his home and land. This woman was an intriguer; she would marry the highest title, and care little who possessed it. Well, if she would not, since he defended her

there, her parents would, and he well knew it was all the same.

René d'Isten listened, and said he would consider, and went to judge critically this woman. Was she maligned by popular report? or had he heard the truth from his good friend the marchioness?

He found mother and daughter together. The mother's delicate blandishments and fascinations prejudiced him in her favour, while the daughter's contrasting manner seemed to him more truly maidenly than anything he had yet seen, and impressed upon him the assurance that she would never yield herself to an ambitious marriage, and would love passionately if once aroused. He would be the chivalrous knight who would reconcile parents and child, and rescue the beauteous damsel from her distressing position. Now the marchioness could no longer affect him: he had espoused a cause, and nothing would detach him from it.

Bref, he pressed his suit and won the consent of the parents, who gave it eagerly, and of the daughter, who showed a shy reserve very attractive to him. He saw his *fiancée* only in swift moments, however, and the mother much more intimately. She was continually talking of Louise, praising her deftly ; laying open apparently the girl's whole life for his reverent inspection, and he looked at the pages she turned and was content. The visionary ideal he had formed was thrown into the background ; reality effaced imagination, and a happy temperament surrounded the reality with a glamour of golden possibilities.

Louise was dignified, reserved, unapproachable : he thought them all qualities of virgin self-respect. Her wit, which was tinged with bitterness, he thought the result of her position, from which she would soon be freed. Her joyous gaiety disappeared : he thought it the steadying effect of new ties upon an earnest nature. When she vouch-

safed him a glance he thought its dark tumult meant a conflict between feeling and maidenly reticence, and eagerly anticipated the time when she should give full liberty to a delicious emotion.

Somewhat to his surprise, however, her parents were the ones to urge a speedy union. It was now deep into the summer ; the town was almost deserted. The marchioness, among others, had gone away a little angry, hoping that before long René would awake from his delusion.

But the future mother-in-law invited M. d'Isten to their new and magnificent castle amid the grand scenery of the mountains, just the other side of the French boundary, and once there they persuaded him to consent to an immediate marriage. His father, whom he had wished to have meet his *fiancée*, was absent on important affairs, and wrote anxious letters ; but when René asked him, as the first favour of his life, to acquiesce in this consummation of his hopes, he did so, although reluctantly.

The ceremony was to be performed in the new and gorgeous chapel. The whole estate was resplendently illuminated ; the house was thrown open, and filled with light and flowers from turret to hall. A vast concourse of persons was invited, and hastened to come. René's step-brothers were there, but his father and the old marchioness could not be present, and they were the only two real friends the bridegroom felt he had.

At last, amid the splendour, the bride appeared. She was pallid even to grayness ; her lips were compressed, her eyes glittering. Superbly dressed, her figure drawn to its haughtiest height, and her whole bearing that of extreme effort at self-command, she looked handsomer than ever before,—and yet she made him shudder from head to foot.

But it was too late for hesitation.

When they met at the altar it would have been difficult to say which hand was the coldest, which self-control the most tense. For his part,

he could remember nothing of the ceremony, nothing of responses or oaths.

He saw nothing, heard nothing, until, when the blessing was pronounced, Louise muttered low, he knew, yet it could not have deafened him more had it been shrieked :

‘ God, strike me dead !’

René pushed his chair suddenly aside, and rose. Bethesda, whose wide eyes had been fixed on him, dropped them with a shuddering sigh. Her soul was a sea of pity, which dashed its spray even over herself.

Mabel looked from one to the other, and then said slowly :

‘ Poor creature !’

‘ Yes,’ responded René, turning towards them, and leaning on the high back of Mrs. Trescott’s chair ; ‘ I never grieved for any one as I did for Louise at that moment. I thought of nothing except that she was in agony,—and that she was my wife.’

He seated himself again, and continued.

For the rest of the evening each sense was acutely clear, each nerve strained to do its duty, in shielding her and himself. For the moment they were more completely identified than any other circumstance could have made them.

Her stern self-command did not again leave her. In spite of the heat, the excitement, and the merry supper, not the faintest colour tinged her face; but, as the hours passed, her eyes glittered more and more dangerously.

M. d'Isten kept her constantly in sight; his watchfulness did not importune, nor did it leave her. He, too, was discharging his duties with successful self-mastery. That one instant, flaming over the past, and lighting the future with a cruel glare, had taught him more in concealment than had his whole previous life of twenty-two years. All the force his nature might possess was suddenly called into action, and it did not fail him. The guests who had anticipated, it

may be, a brilliant scandal, as a continuance of the present entertainment, saw the young husband already assuming the responsibilities of his position, and doubted any further amusement. Had they done otherwise they would have been disappointed, remarked René d'Isten quietly.

It had been a stipulation, made by the parents, that their only child should not be taken from them, but that the newly-married couple should, for a time at least, reside in their home. They were to return to a suite of apartments provided for them, after a honeymoon spent at the d'Isten's château, thirty miles away. The next morning they would leave, escorted half-way by a gay cavalcade of the marriage guests, but this night they were to pass where the wedding had taken place.

M. d'Isten spent it entirely in his wife's ante-chamber, either pacing noiselessly from corner to corner, or standing in the open window. The room was dark, for nothing must betray their

miserable secret. This was the one point on which he was resolved.

In his abstraction of fierce thought he at one time brushed the *portières* hanging before the door opening into the room where she was. He recoiled from the touch ; it seemed to poison him. He leaned far out of the window, to reach the pure night air. He was still, but every sense was electrically alive. The slightest sound, or touch, sent a shock through him as if it had been from a battery.

In this state he could decide nothing ; but a tidal wave of irresistible feeling rolled up, and marked with a deep line the resolve to know all, and the determination that his name should not be stained.

The short summer night wore away, and the dawn came. Birds sang exultingly ; trees and flowers gleamed in the growing light ; a damp breeze blew over the forest, and refreshed his hot brain. He longed to be away, amid the ever-

lastingness of nature. He would have given much for a ride over the desert, through that grand monotony which dwarfs and stills human suffering.

But the forest and the hills would be something. He changed his clothing, and went out from the terrace window. For hours he wandered through the morning glades, with nature smiling in his face, and the birds carolling overhead. His electric susceptibility decreased here, where all was the same as for years and years. A forest could not be made, or destroyed, in a day, an hour, an instant. How long had it taken her to speak those words? He wondered over it, in a curiously minute calculation, which absorbed his whole mind. Presently he roused himself with a start. Anything was better than this idiocy, this appalling weakness. He *must* have presence of mind.

He remained in the forest until the fiery spell, which alternated with this apathy, was quenched,

and he knew he could depend upon his mind. In a few hours he would be alone with his wife ; then all should be explained. No decision could be made until facts were clearly known.

He returned to the house. Numerous domestics were stirring lazily. He contrived to elude them all, and to return by the terrace without being seen. He performed a scrupulous toilette, for appearances were now everything. Then he forced himself to read, and understand, a book on some scientific question in which he had been interested, until the morning was far advanced.

A valet came and knocked loudly. M. d'Isten dismissed him, and then tapped on his wife's door.

It opened almost immediately. Madame d'Isten, dressed for her journey, stood before him. She met his grave eyes with a glance of defiance and curiosity combined ; he read her shrewdly now. He asked if he might speak with her, and she gave a silent acquiescence, sending away her maid by a gesture.

He entered the room with a firm step, and took the seat to which she motioned him. Each instant she shot inquiring glances at him, her defiance gradually disappearing, and her curiosity replaced by something like fear. He did not wish this.

‘Madame,’ he said, ‘you consented to become my wife.’ You wear my name. We are married. Whatever may seem strange to you or me we must conceal from the world. This is due to your dignity and mine, and to the name we both now bear. I trust you agree with me?’

‘Certainly,’ was the laconic response.

‘Every incident will take place as expected by your guests. Women understand dissimulation; it is not necessary to say more. Shall I take you to the breakfast-room, madame?’

She was somewhat confused. The sullen look which had gathered on her face while he spoke was broken by conflicting sentiments.

He awaited her pleasure. It was desirable

that her confidences should be postponed until they were alone ; but, if she chose, it should be now.

After a moment she rose with an energy which threw down her chair. M. d'Isten picked it up in silence. He opened the doors for her to pass, and, when they reached the gallery, gave her his arm. They were immediately joined by a gay bevy, and did not see each other again alone until they arrived at his château—the place selected for the bringing home of his beautiful bride, and the fondly-anticipated honeymoon.

Little by little, only by the utmost tact and timing of her moods was the confidence he had determined upon securing, given him. He studied her with care. Nothing escaped him ; no trait was manifested that did not print itself on his mind with painful distinctness. She took it for granted that he had learned—how she could not guess, not knowing she had spoken

aloud in that supreme moment—her secret, and, won by the sympathy which he sincerely gave her, relieved herself in an impetuous outpouring. Through it he discovered what she supposed he already knew.

It was a story bitterly common he knew now; then it seemed to him terribly strange.

She had met and loved a sub-officer stationed in the town where she was at school. They bribed the woman who walked out with the class to connive at their clandestine meetings, and had sworn undying fidelity. In parting she had promised to use all her influence to win her parents' consent to their marriage. She returned to her home, and was immediately surrounded by adulation, and her parents' ambitious intrigues. They refused her request with scorn, and pricked her pride to a greater aim. She wrote her lover, presently, that he must win her by making a name; and he, in return, reproached her for her lack of affection, but assured her that, if she

would but wait, he would make a name she need not be ashamed to accept.

During the year which ensued she refused many good offers, and won the name of a person who could only be secured at a high price, while she was, she affirmed, only keeping faith with a man whose patent of nobility was love.

Then Monsieur le Comte d'Isten, heir to the title of Marquis, appeared. His name and position, she acknowledged, were not without their effect upon her. In fact, her ambition, her pride, her desire for power, had been powerful advocates of his cause. Her love, however, struggled rebelliously under the weight of alien thoughts, and would have conquered had not its death-blow been dealt, and her better nature ruined, by her mother's machinations. She told her daughter that her lover had deserted her and was betrothed to another woman.

‘And she believed it?’ exclaimed Bethesda.

‘She did. Had she not, I think she would

have refused my titles. She loved him well enough for that.'

'But not well enough to believe in him, murmured the girl involuntarily.

'No,' answered René gravely; 'few women have the capacity to love another better than themselves. Louise is not one of the few; she has many sisters in character.'

There was a pause. Bethesda did not speak again. M. d'Isten went on.

Despair and rage made the deceived woman willing to submit to her parents' urging of a speedy marriage. She would be married first. The traitor should see that she was not to be left thus scornfully to break her heart unconsolated.

But on the very evening of their marriage, when she was already dressed for the ceremony, a letter had been secretly handed to her, and the lover explained, in the agonised language of truth, that he was not unfaithful; that the story of his new betrothment was a fable of her

mother's; that he had been promoted, and transferred to a regiment which would be quartered in the town of S——; and that he was then awaiting her in the park, ready to rescue her from the ignominy of this marriage, and replace it by one where her love, at least, would support her; if she slipped from the house, if only for a moment, he would save her at the cost of his life, and even hers. It was better that she should die than sell her soul.

She suffered tortures while the few moments lingered during which she could have gained her freedom and saved the happiness of at least three lives.

But they passed unimproved. She was still convulsed in the throes of alternate ambition and love when her solitude was invaded and the crisis was over. She must now become Madame la Comtesse d'Isten. She bent to her destiny, which brought her a title and married freedom, and her wretched new life began.

She was never for an instant content. Her satisfied ambition left her defenceless before the onslaughts of her outraged love. The honeymoon passed in torrents of tears and convulsions of remorse. Always for herself and her lover. The thought of her husband never occurred to her except as an object of interference. He recognised it, and kept himself strictly in the background.

The one thing, meantime, which she commanded, beseeched, implored, was that her husband should let her live in the city where she could see *him* pass ; where, at the theatre, their eyes might meet ; where she could know whether he was dead or alive ; and then she swore by her religion, by her love itself, that she would remember whose wife she was, and that her husband should never have cause to complain.

M. d'Isten took time to consider. He understood the character with which he had to deal, and he deliberately marked out the hard lines of

his changed life. He would let her have her will, and would do everything in his power, by patience and kindness, so long as she kept her word, to win his wife's affection, if not her love.

So he consented to her desires. When, in the long years that followed, she would spring from her chair and rush to the window at the sound of a horse's hoofs and a sabre, he would fix his eyes on the opposite wall and never stir. When, at the theatre, she blushed and her face was stirred by emotion, he would never seek the place where she had looked, but rather let his eyes fall that he might not see too much. Even when she would throw herself on his neck and pour out her sorrow and her undying regret for ——, he would stop her with tender firmness, and insist that she should never mention that name.

With a kindness he tried to make invariable with constant study, and a yearning she never suspected, he endeavoured to win the affection

which was still hers to give. His attentions were those of a yet unaccepted suitor. In no way did he exercise any marital authority except one: he made her understand that the instant anything occurred to compromise his honour he would put her away. She had not failed. Once, in a fit of desperation, she was about to leave him, but the flight was prevented; she knew not how. She never dreamed that he knew it, but there was nothing she did which he did not know. He had his honour to guard, and it had not been betrayed.

For four years he devoted himself to nothing but his wife, and for success he was granted the knowledge that at any time she would have inwardly rejoiced at his death, and that she found life so unendurable that she had often threatened to kill herself, and he had even taken a pistol from her hand when he had once unexpectedly returned to her side.

Such was the domesticity marriage had

brought him ; the home which had taken the place of his glowing visions ; the reality that had usurped his ideals.

At the end of four years every expedient had been tried which a hearty will could suggest. All had ignominiously failed. There only remained now to change all the circumstances and influences around them, and see what would ensue.

René went to pay a long-delayed visit to his father. The years since his marriage had been intensely reserved, self-reliant years. Everything had been done from himself ; no one was his confidant or counsellor. He had not been away from Louise except for the few bloody weeks of the war ; but now he made a long visit to his beloved parent.

He then expressed to him his desire to choose a vocation which should actively employ him, and signified his willingness to follow his father's advice. The marquis was overjoyed, and im-

mediately obtained for his son a position under one of the finest statesmen in France ; a confidential position, which he hoped would lead to the highest honours.

When this was arranged René d'Isten returned to his wife, and asked her to accompany him to Paris. She refused, with a torrent of passion. He then quietly forced her to see the life she was compelling him to lead, and the misery to which she was subjecting herself. He acquainted her with his resolve to try a change. He had submitted to her wishes in large and small things, only to increase their mutual unhappiness. She must, in this instance, submit to him. He was going where his duties called him ; she should accompany him. Once in Paris he would do all in his power to help her to find pleasure or relief from *ennui* ; but to Paris she must go.

Of course she did so ultimately, but she apparently exhausted herself in finding the means to render the preparations and the

journey disagreeable. In Paris her days were spent in weeping or tempests of anger, her only aim being to make it so trying to her husband that he would perforce let her return home.

He meantime kept his promise in providing her with every distraction, but his manner had changed from what it had been. He was no longer the suitor, but the husband. He wished to make a complete alteration in their lives, and allow his will to become active where it had been so long passive. But no change could fulfil his hope of winning her affection, and, after six months of unceasing struggle he escorted her back to her parents, and returned to Paris alone.

‘Our lives now flow in the separate channels she has made,’ he said, ‘and they probably will to the end. I do all I can for her. I write often ; I visit her frequently ; she is not cramped or coerced in any way but the one : since she wears my name it must be blamelessly. I have tried to be a good husband.’

‘You are an ideal husband,’ exclaimed Mabel, the tears again standing in her eyes. ‘I cannot imagine one more self-abnegating or noble. Tell Beth the last. You must not forget your crowning sacrifice. Tell her why you went to Rome.’

‘I should not easily forget my going there, since it brought what has proved to be the happiest period of my life. I went to Rome to see a French General, then on a mission there. The man Louise loved had been ordered to be exchanged into an Algerian regiment. He had made a serious mistake—disobedience it was called—and the punishment was temporary exile. Louise was distracted with grief at the prospect, and beseeched me to use my influence in his behalf. It was not easy for me to do, but I undertook it. It might be a providential chance for her affection. If this would not win her, nothing could. I went to Rome, and remained there some time, as you know. When I had gained the favour I heard from Louise. My

efforts made no impression on her, except, indeed, that she upbraided me for lack of zeal in being so slow. That severed the last link which bound my hopes to her. It became of small consequence whether she liked or disliked me, and I felt freed from a nightmare of ignominy to be dependant no longer. The man understood my position better. He wrote to me, and I need fear him no more. Then I came to Florence and met you.'

He looked full at Bethesda with an indescribable expression of gratitude. Her eyes were wide with pain, her cheeks were flushed, her hair pushed back as it had been from an unconscious gesture of distress. She had been leaning forward in a listening intentness, but now she rose.

For an instant she lingered by René's chair. He felt her brooding over him with a tenderness of overwhelming pity.

'My pool of Béthesda,' he said, in a very low tone.

An irradiation as of white light crossed her features. It flashed and disappeared, and she went quickly away.

René d'Isten always held that he had seen the gleam of an angel's wing reflected in her face.

CHAPTER XIV.

‘In Godhead rise, thither flow back
All loves, which, as they keep or lack,
In their return, the course assigned
Are virtue or sin.’ COVENTRY PATMORE.

‘The light and darkness in our chaos joined,
What shall divide ? The God within the mind.’—POPE.

THE change this culminating confidence made in the mutual relations of all three was unmistakable ; and yet, to an outsider, it might have seemed to have had no effect. It was only a question of delight when Bethesda and René were together ; when they were apart doubts came.

René felt deeply that the sorrows of his life were being compensated. His fate had been accepted when it was hardest ; now, when it was rendered brilliant and beautiful by the glad devotion of a pure heart, he put from him all

thought of regret. This impotent emotion, indeed, experience had long since taught him to look upon as deplorable weakness, and he was not going to be weak,—no, far from it. He would be unlike other men.

This was what whetted his resolution not to let his heart gain ascendancy over his head, which he was very well aware was the tendency of such close sympathy as now subsisted between himself and Bethesda. He had no doubt of his power to control himself. His life had taught him to crush all buds of passion before they were large enough to enervate his strength, and he thought he could trust himself without any danger in the society of this woman who each hour made him feel more blessed.

In looking back he could hardly believe his fate had been at last so kind to him. Long ago he had been forced to relinquish the thought of seeing his ideal realised. Not alone his unfortunate marriage, but also his contact with a

frivolous and desecrated society, had made such visions seem baseless and impossible. He had never lost sight of his dreams; in fact, his marriage, in throwing him back on himself so completely as it had done, restored them with only more radiant colouring; but he had learned to regard them as poetic fancies, not to be found living and treading the pathways of this world. Then, in the midst of his shattered anticipations, which he regarded with resignation; in the midst of a society he despised; in the most barren period of his life, appeared his vision, incarnate, and he was allowed to enter her intimacy.

He was the first; the first who had been able to sway her; the first that had conquered her from herself; the first who had known how to cross the mystic stream about her impregnable castle and claim a welcome from its regal inmate.

And Bethesda, meantime, had not an even dim conception of where she was being led. While René was fortifying himself, realising at

least somewhat of the strength of the test he was undergoing, Bethesda had not dreamed of there being any test. She knew, of course, that such union of minds as this might become, would probably, *in other circumstances*, mean union of hearts as well. ‘But,’ she thought, quite simply, ‘the possibility of this with us is precluded;’ never thinking that circumstances are like straw, to be burned by passion or whirled away by the wind of free-will.

Her life, however, was now a turmoil. The fires beneath were making the straw crackle, and hot springs bubble up through the cool waters of innocence and purity. She would kneel in the window till her brain refused longer to think, and she threw herself on the bed, to awaken late in the morning with a jubilant sense that the hour drew near when she should again see René, and all questioning would be at rest; at least until she was again delivered to the solitary midnight battle.

And Mrs. Trescott thought that it might be a second Dante and Beatrice, and still half reluctantly consented. The two did not meet except in Mabel's presence ; but with the unveiling of the secret which had separated them like a phantom during all their previous intercourse, the most complete confidence was established. Truly René told Bethesda all. Each minute circumstance that he could describe, every unimportant incident, found a listening ear, an unbounded sympathy, and a proper place in the annals of his life. This was the excuse which accounted for the transference of absolute knowledge from him to her, not alone of circumstances and intentions, but faults and penitent confessions. She became quite literally his conscience.

It has been well said that we expect one faculty to do the work of another in mental and moral life. Especially in regard to the functions of reason and conscience do we make this mistake. The conscience 'is not alone expected to

enforce doing what is right, but to decide what the right is.' Now this was precisely Bethesda's fault. She looked to her conscience as the leader of morality—its judge instead of its executor. She referred her daily life, and the lives of those with whom she came in contact, to her conscience instead of her reason. The latter was utterly untaught. Mrs. Trescott had in many ways a high disdain for pure reason, and was apt to apply the term 'reasonable' to anything she wished to do, and the term 'unreasonable' to that which any one else wished to do in conflict with her desires.

But fortunately reason does not consist of this fluctuating quantity. It is the one absolute principle which thrones itself above all others, and judges with accurate impartiality. It is this which condemns our dearest desires, and makes us trample them under foot to reach to the footstool of majestic virtue. It is this to which we must cleave with our utmost tenacity,

and an ever-exercised strength, if we would not slip into ignorance, superstition, and error. Conscience is but its servant and 'ready sentinel.' It enforces what has been commanded, and reads the decree of reward and punishment. Bethesda was trying to make it do its supreme lord's work, and, of course, she signally failed.

René d'Isten had, if possible, still less apprehension of this high king, except as a recognised authority corroborated his decisions. He had been educated in the Roman Catholic Church, which is the destroyer of personal intercourse between reason and humanity, and the dictator of uncomprehending obedience. René d'Isten's nature was, moreover, peculiarly obedient. Wherever he gave confidence he gave obedience—to the Church, to France, to his father, and now to Bethesda.

She was learning rapidly that what she said he did, what she suggested he executed, what she affirmed he believed. It was a terrible re-

sponsibility. Her conscience, weakened by a tacit disobedience, and without any strength of reason behind it, faltered more and more often under the double burden. But this was only in the hours when she was solitary and despondent. Her conscience was strong enough to execute what her reason knew to be right one step ahead; but she wished to see the whole road, and where it led, before she went against the rock that seemed to bar her path—the rock of an entire relinquishment of René and the consequences of such a step to him.

When she was with him, however, they mutually felt the support of good intentions, and the self-control they constantly practised. The difference between them lay in this: when René was away from Bethesda he was planning how he could advance and not have it seem wrong to her; when she was away from him she was trying to brace herself to the effort of receding step by step, so that René should not ‘feel hurt.’

Her forces were divided; his, firm to one purpose. Need it be said that he always won?

One of his last steps was this:

They were talking about the correspondence. The steamer tickets had been bought that day, and it made the time of separation seem very near. René was planning, in his usual orderly way, how often, and on what days, he would write.

‘I shall be exactly regular,’ he said. ‘Twice a week I shall send you letters. If they do not arrive, you may know the steamer is late.’

‘What a devoted correspondent I shall have!’ exclaimed Mabel. ‘I must admit, I am glad the necessity of answering will not lie all on me.’

René made some light reproach, but immediately relapsed into his former preoccupation. Without a word having been said between him and Bethesda on the subject in his mind, he knew they were thoroughly of accord. Her *petite mine melancholique*, which always fascinated René,

was deepened this evening into actual sadness; for there hung over her the shadow of a speedy departure from Europe, and, more than all Europe, as she dimly realised, from her mind's companion.

There was a little silence, then Mabel exclaimed :

‘ Well, what is it, René? You look as if you were pondering about a conspiracy.’

‘ Not a conspiracy,’ was the quick reply, ‘ for you are in it; and you, we well know, would never be in a conspiracy. But, if you will allow me, Madame Mabelle, I will tell you what I was thinking.’

‘ Out with it!’ she cried. ‘ Of course you want something. I know your clever ways, and your cajoling “ Madame Mabelle !” ’

She imitated him quite successfully, and there was some merry laughter before René resumed :

‘ I was querying whether it would not be better for me to address you one letter, and

mademoiselle the second. It might be better understood.'

He waited to see the effect of this hint on a delicate subject before proceeding further. This matter, and one other, were the only remaining points to be gained; then the affair would be between him and Esda, and therefore absolutely safe. He watched Mrs. Trescott with a veiled intentness, remarking with satisfaction that Bethesda had assumed the same attitude.

Mabel, however skilfully the question had been insinuated, felt its importance; but her energetic opposition was sapped by that last sentence. What, indeed, would they think at home? Her impetuous refusal was checked on her very lips.

She glanced somewhat helplessly from one to the other of her companions. Beth could not resist this appeal. At the very moment that Mabel faltered: 'I don't know—I don't like it—but——' Beth exclaimed:

‘The letters are to be half for me in any case, auntie, and if it is to make questions, I would much prefer being open and frank about it. You would too, auntie. You always say so.’

‘Yes, but then——’ She stopped again, her usual ready flow of speech checked by this misery of public opinion.

‘You are, of course, to do entirely as you judge best, madame,’ said René gently. ‘It rests with you to decide. But I should think if you both received letters——’ He paused judiciously.

‘Well, well!’ exclaimed Mabel in some impatience. ‘Do as you choose. After all, that is the frank way, and I hate nothing so much as concealment.’

René, having gained his point, now exerted himself to lead conversation and thoughts away from it, and it was not until the next evening that his final attack began.

It was introduced by Mrs. Trescott herself.

‘I have been thinking, René,’ she said, at a time when Bethesda was busied at the other side of the room, ‘about the correspondence between you and Beth. It is right enough that she should receive her letters openly. It would be wrong for her to receive them at all if that were not the case ; but of course the letters are all to be seen by me.’

‘That is for your niece to say, madame ; not me. I would not dream of dictating her actions in however slight a matter.’

‘Beth, come here!’ called Mrs. Trescott rather sharply. ‘I must have this affair well understood. In your correspondence with René I shall expect to see all the letters. I cannot permit it otherwise. You understand?’

The tone was aggressive and harsh. Bethesda would always have fired at it, now she sprang into defiance.

‘I have always been in the habit of showing you my letters, Aunt Mabel, but it has been en-

tirely at my own option, and I decline to allow it now to be compelled.'

'Then I refuse to let you two correspond!'

René took up a book from the table, and, as he did so, just perceptibly brushed Bethesda's hand. The touch recalled her lessons in tact and self-control. She steadied herself, both physically and mentally; she stepped back to an inward support before she lifted her eyes to her aunt's face, and said calmly:

'Why, Aunt Mabel?'

'Because this is a dangerous affair,' burst out Mabel; 'because your only safeguard, to either and both of you, is to have no secrecy; because gunpowder is most dangerous when it is confined, and the only way for you to be saved from imminent peril is to have everything open; otherwise you will be compromised, otherwise——'

Bethesda laid her hand closely over Mabel's nervous fingers, and said in a voice of concentrated dignity:

‘Pray, don’t speak so. I never refused to let you see my letters ; I only refused to be coerced. There is no call for me to change a lifelong habit now.’

‘Then it is understood that there will be no letters pass between you which I shall not read ?’

Mabel looked with still fiery eyes from one to the other, as they stood side by side. René waited for Bethesda to speak, and she replied in a firm voice :

‘Understood as it always has been ; no more.’

‘Madame,’ said René, leaning forward, ‘I am sure you understand that no letter I would write to Béthesda could she object to have you see ; but pray remember, dear madame, that our compact is singular ; and that between two writers, between Béthesda and Béthesda, there might be much written which you would not care to see.’

‘It isn’t the caring I think about,’ exclaimed Mabel, speaking no longer sharply ; ‘you know I

don't speak from that motive. It is only my desire to save you two from the *greatest danger*.' She underlined these words with the full weight of her emphatic voice. 'The very fact of knowing your letters are to be seen by a third person will probably avert it. You need to take every precaution, I tell you. The risks of your position cannot be exaggerated.'

'You are quite right, no doubt, madame,' said René gravely. 'It might be a dangerous position for many. For us, with you to advise, its danger can be easily avoided.'

Bethesda moved a little away. He felt that his secure words reassured her, even to herself.

'See,' he continued, 'we will do this, will we not, Bethesda? Madame Mabelle shall rest assured that, when you return to America, she shall see all the letters I send you; and she shall agree—yes, madame?—that our Bethesda pages shall be ours alone, even as they are here.'

‘Until they are published,’ added Beth innocently.

To this Mabel finally consented.

‘I don’t feel as if I ought,’ she said; ‘but I trust you two so completely, that you can do anything with me. I never did have a firm nature. I could always be coaxed out of anything not really wrong.’

The next morning, however, Mabel went to Beth’s room early, with a very sober countenance.

‘Beth,’ she said, plunging *in medias res*, ‘I have been thinking nearly all night, and I want you to go to London.’

Bethesda was about to exclaim, but restrained herself. Mabel went on :

‘You see, matters between you and René are maturing fast. It is some time yet before we sail. I can’t see where this will end, and neither can you. If you go away now, nothing further can happen. Evra will be delighted beyond measure to see you ; I will stay here and finish

our shopping, and you will relieve me of great anxiety.'

'What has made you so suddenly wish this, Aunt Mabel?' asked Bethesda, in a reticent tone.

'Because every hour makes me more anxious. I am afraid you two are walking into what you don't know. I am sure he already loves you, Beth, and you may, if you stay, love him.'

Bethesda did not start nor speak, but her face faded slowly to a bloodless gray.

'I am afraid, my dear, dear little girl, I am afraid that you are sowing seeds of misery for your whole life. How can I ever forgive myself if your young and lovely and promising life should be blasted in its bud, and through my agency? It is a terrible risk to run; terrible for me as well as you, darling. Do go away while the harm is yet undone.'

'You think he loves me,' said Bethesda, in an intensely suppressed tone. 'Why do you?'

'Everything shows it, dear; all his actions, all

his words, all his looks. I don't think it will harm him, or be anything but happiness to him. He has nothing to lose, and everything to gain. But you, dearie, you have all to lose, and nothing to gain. It would break my heart if you should be unhappy.'

'I shall not be; don't fear for me, auntie. But do you suppose you are surely right? Do you think he recognises it himself?'

'He may, and he may not; I can't say. Oh, if he were only unmarried, how happy I should be to do everything to favour this! You are made for one another; it would have been a perfect——'

'Hush, auntie, please,' said Bethesda, in a tone of unendurable pain.

'Now, perhaps it will be hard for you to marry, my darling.'

Bethesda tried to recover herself.

'I probably never would have married,' she said.

She moved away the length of the room, and then turned with a sudden flash in her eyes :

‘ Aunt Mabel, I can’t believe in this supposition of yours ! You have mistaken him, as you have me.’

‘ I *know* he loves you, Beth, and you *may* love him. Do go to London, dear.’

‘ There is no necessity for it, at least not with me. I still think you may be mistaken in him as well.’

‘ If he should swear he did not love you, I would know better ! I have not lived as long as I have for nothing. But his loving you I don’t mind. He is honourable, and worthy of the confidence I place in him. It undoubtedly makes him happier ; he shows it in every fibre of body and mind. But you, darling, are growing thin and tired-looking. Your sympathies are too strongly excited, and this emotional atmosphere is bad for you. It will be a rest to you to go away.’

‘To Evra? She would kill me!’ cried Beth involuntarily. ‘Besides, there isn’t any need, auntie. If you are only afraid for me, and think the joy will outweigh the pain for him, why, I will certainly stay. I can assure you there is no need of doing otherwise on my account.’

‘It would relieve me immensely if you would go away.’

‘You need not be anxious about me; but, to make you quite easy, I will say this: If I feel the necessity of going to London, I will do so without your asking me.’

‘That is a promise. Well, that does relieve me, for I know you are only anxious to do right; and I am glad for you to have all the pleasure you can, and not take pain with it.’

Mrs. Trescott left her then, but all day, through dressmakers’ chatter and clerks’ prices and praises, the conflicting thoughts Mabel had brought uppermost in her mind haunted Bethesda like double and confusing shadows. What one would

say, the other would contradict; what one would insist upon as the absolute necessity, the other would assert to be needless and silly.

She looked forward to the luncheon-table to decide the question. Then she would see him, and each minute action should be scrutinised. If he loved her, she ought to go away. Ought she? Why not leave it to him, since it was his happiness or unhappiness which was concerned? To herself, she did not lend a thought. Even when her aunt had pressed it home she had hardly thought of herself. That it would, of course, be happier for her to stay she never doubted. The only question was: Would it be right to him?

Before entering the luncheon-room she stopped to lay aside her things, and caught sight of her face in the glass. Its pallor and fatigue startled her; there were great rings around her eyes, which seemed burning in their sockets. The fanciful notion came to her that they were like inverted torches, with ashes thick about them.

She smiled at the fantastic idea, rubbed her cheeks hard to rouse a little colour, and joined her aunt.

M. d'Isten was not there. She remembered, now, that he had mentioned having an engagement at this time with one of the ministers. She felt cold, and lonely, and dispirited. The prolonged suspense seemed more than she could bear. If she could have been set down in London that minute she believed she would, just from weariness. But it was impossible for her to decide if it were necessary for her to leave; and, if not necessary, why bring the pain sooner than must be?

She went upstairs and found on the table a cluster of moss roses, the stems held together by a ring René had taken to have made smaller for her. It was the one he had selected, and which her aunt had given her on her last birthday.

The glowing ruby clasping the words, 'Let not grass grow on the path of friendship,' seemed

a direct answer to her doubts. It made her glad and light-hearted, and, putting it on her finger, she closed her hand softly over it, and so holding it on the sofa a while later, she fell asleep.

Just before she awoke a dream came to her, short and vivid.

She went down, she dreamed, with a wrecked ship in mid-ocean, but rising, caught the side of a raft, and was in comparative safety. Then the raft began to crumble ; the waves broke over her more and more. Suddenly a woman was tossed near, and tried to catch the spar, too small, Bethesda knew, to save more than one. At first she did not aid the woman, but allowed her to have the same chance she herself had had ; then, with a nobler impulse, stretched out her hand to assist her. The drowning creature grasped it convulsively, and, in a moment, shared her frail support.

But where had she seen that face ? It fascinated her ; she forgot everything in trying

to solve the mystery. The woman meantime, realising the raft could not save them both, and seeing Bethesda absorbed, gave her a sudden shove into the foaming waves. And Bethesda, her mind now keenly clear, exclaimed : Louise !

She sank down, down into the green water, and the woman's face, bent over the edge of the raft, followed her with wide-distended eyes. 'He will hate me, hate me !' she cried despairingly ; and Bethesda, still sinking, awoke.

CHAPTER XV.

‘Love in thy heart like living waters rose,
Thine own self lost in the abounding flood ;
So that with thee, joy, comfort, thy life’s good,
Thy youth’s delight, thy beauty’s freshest rose,
Were trash, thy unregretful bounty chose
Before loved feet, for softness, to be strewed.’

W. C. ROSCOE.

THE evening came and passed ; the dreaded meeting was over, and her worries had slipped from her, leaving her light and glad. Why worry about him ? she asked herself. Women take so much upon themselves ; they feel the weight of the universe, of every man who likes them, upon their shoulders ! ‘They never seem to remember,’ she exclaimed half aloud, her head defiantly poised, ‘that men are also reasonable beings, quite able to take care of them-

selves,—probably much better than we could take care of them at our best. Leave each his independence of action, men as well as women ; let them decide what is right for them, without question from us, and we the same. If we carry our own trials worthily it is as much as we are able to do—often more !’

She worried all night, however, in spite of her defiant words, and at last resolved upon speaking to René herself frankly, and asking him to be strong with her in combating any equivocal tendencies they might feel growing upon them. So she wrote him a note, asking him to come to the parlour a moment. He answered immediately in person, looking very grave, but with the greatest consideration in his manner.

Mrs. Trescott had already gone out, and it was the first time the two had met alone. He was well aware that it could only be because of something Bethesda considered gravely important that she would have asked him to come to her.

As he entered he took in the situation at once. She was dressed for the street, and her hat lay upon the table. He saw that she was similarly prepared to leave him, unless he could set her anxieties at rest.

She was standing, and thanked him for coming so quickly in a low, steady voice, which made him seat himself in the chair to which she motioned him, ready to face the worst.

There was a little pause, during which her hands clasped one another closely, but in a moment she lifted her eyes and met his bravely.

‘I asked you to come here,’ she said, ‘because I feel that we have not been doing quite right of late. I trust to you to understand me. I wished to ask you to help me in never doing anything which you could not repeat to your wife without embarrassment.’

She stopped, and her breath came somewhat fast, but he did not keep her in suspense.

‘You know that whatever you wish is a

command for me,' he said earnestly. 'I shall do as you desire to the utmost of my power.'

'Thanks,' she said, with a glance from clear eyes which already repaid him for any sacrifice. 'I was sure you would. Auntie wished me to go to London, but I thought we could stay together the short time that remained.'

'Yes,' he replied, not looking up now; 'we will be strong. It must be. We cannot help that; we must only strive to be strong.'

She did not understand all his meaning, but she knew that her heart was crying out: Noble, noble René! She had more confidence in him than in herself. He was strong, and had the habit of many self-controlled years upon him. But when she saw him sad, his only opportunity for *abandon* cut off—what should she do then?

Her eyes flashed to his face. It impressed her profoundly. 'I will follow his example!' she cried to herself; 'I will be brave, and pure, as he is.'

'Monsieur,' she said suddenly. 'Will you

tell your wife openly of our compact and our friendship? She should know it all.'

He hesitated just an instant; then he said gravely:

'Since you think it best, I will.'

'Ah, that takes a weight from one's heart!' she cried.

She held out her hand to him with a frank gesture of gratitude, rising as she did so.

He also rose, and took her palm in his.

'Do not fear, Béthesda,' he said; 'we will be strong.'

He turned, bowed profoundly, and left her; and she walked away to the window, her hands pressed to her heart, which was in strange confusion, while her soul was relieved and thankful.

Would she aid his wife, now, to ascend the breaking raft? Yes; she believed she would. She could only try to make herself worthy of him by all unselfish actions.

The following day was Sunday, and an

atmosphere of peace seemed to brood over Bethesda, strangely sweet after the turmoil of the last days. She knew, too, whence it came. The effort in the right direction brought its own reward. A feeling of righteousness strengthened her to the fulfilment of her resolve; and her intercourse with René, chastened yet constant, retained all its delight, without the sting of possible wrong.

She won the others to her own feelings also. Mrs. Trescott, to whom the interview and its results had been fully confided, felt almost as much relieved as Bethesda. She thought the earnest resolve of two such natures could not be without good effect. And René, strongly influenced by Bethesda's dignified, yet touching appeal, did as she had bidden him, and at least followed where she led.

So to-day, spirit really seemed to be overcoming the laws of nature, and the boon of peace descended upon them.

The hours winged their way slowly by, fragrant as the June breeze ; still as a floating bird. In the morning they went across the river to church, and, in the midst of holy pictures, with the Gothic arches clasping hands in prayer above them, they listened to High Mass. The intervals were mellowed by organs answering one another in rich harmony, that broadened and uplifted their thoughts ; and, near by, the cooing of a happy child was the sweetest of all the sounds.

Towards the end of the service the baby stretched out its arms to Bethesda, and demanded imperiously to go to her. She was not loath, and, once in her arms, the child became instantly quieted by looking at her. She seemed to appeal to the little one's affection, too, for presently it put a chubby hand softly on her cheek. Bethesda caught the fingers to her lips and pressed the tiny body close with a thrill of irrepressible feeling. Involuntarily she glanced

at René; he was watching her with curious and pitying eyes. He knew, and she knew—then—that she would never hold thus a child of her own.

As they came out she turned from the church reluctantly.

‘I never passed a happier hour,’ she said, ‘and it is our last church going.’

The next week they had planned to go to Versailles, and the next—to think of it!—they would have left Paris.

But this tranquillity was only the trembling stillness of a spring when full to the brim, just ready to overflow, either to sink into the ground or to go streaming down the hills. The next day little signs and words were like the first trickling drops; the day after Bethesda was in the same perplexity, the same half blind struggle for light and knowledge.

The same, and yet not the same; for the appeal she had made and which had been answered, she was sure, in the same earnestness of

spirit that she had asked it, made her lean with fuller reliance on the strength she had proved in René. She knew herself strong enough to go away, to do anything she could positively see to be right ; and she never doubted but that he was conscious of the same power of self-sacrifice to duty. How could she doubt him when every event of his life had evidenced his rectitude and nobility ? So at last she concluded to ask him to tell her what to do. He could see, probably, further than she ; he knew himself even better, and whatever he said would surely be right.

She wrote a short note asking him if she should go to London, and gave it to him when they met. She did not mean to be underhand, but it would be easier for her to wait until she knew his decision before she told her aunt. If he said go, it would of course be instantly known ; if he said stay, it would be the same as if she had not written, and the subject was one on which she was glad to avoid unnecessary agitation.

The evening passed with no disturbing elements. René could not read the note until he had bidden them good - night, but he was conscious of its presence, and suspected what it contained. There was a perturbation in the girl's manner, an almost pleading look in her eyes, which he interpreted aright. But he was exceedingly careful not to frighten her. An incessantly controlled tenderness, a surety of himself, quieted her on whichever side of her question she looked. Her confidence grew as the evening proceeded. He would not send her away ; of course not ; it was foolish in her to think of it.

But, once in her room alone, with the charm of his presence gone, and the heavens looking at her in their calm scrutiny, she was no longer so sure.

She could not say then, or at any future time, why it was that whenever she left René and entered her own room her first impulse was to throw herself on to her knees. There she would

remain for hours. A few times dawn surprised her still kneeling, still dressed. Once or twice she slept, her head pillowed on her folded arms.

But to-night the eagerness to know, or at least to surmise, what René would say, drove her up and down the room with noiseless steps. She almost regretted having left him the decision, and yet she had never relied upon him but he had proved himself strong. So, after every wavering, she came back to the thought that she could trust him. He would not send her away.

The night passed, as it did now more and more frequently, in a slumber so light that not a breath was drawn unconsciously. She awoke late, and there, under the door, was a letter. Her breath fluttered on her lips. She could not reach out her hand to touch this missive of fate. Must she go? Or would he let her stay?

Finally suspense became unbearable ; any

knowledge was better. She tore it open and read.

It was not long, but it worked a transfiguration in Bethesda's nature.

He had seized upon the unrecognised truth which had dictated her note, and showed it in full stature to herself. What she had not dreamed existed, he had exultingly seen. She was his now, unmistakably. He knew it, if she did not; and the sure taking possession which fascinated her never hesitated.

‘I hold thy two hands in mine,’ he wrote, ‘and bid thee stay. I rejoice that when an angel troubled the waters of thy virgin heart I, unlike the afflicted man who waited for years beside the pool in far-off Galilee, am able to step first into the sacred waters, and come forth restored and glad. Ah, now my name has a new significance! I am truly reborn, through the miracle of thy maiden nature stirred for me alone.

‘Fear not, Béthesda, and be not sad. We shall be always together. The breadth of the earth, and the oceans, of heaven itself, cannot divide us now.’

Why, indeed, should she go away? Not distance, or time, or eternity could alter this truth. She loved him! The whole world might marvel; they stood side by side, above the world, above circumstances, above man, and the devil. They were supreme, and united by the divine law of Love.

And she?—Why, the sunshine danced, and the wind was full of thrilling melody, and every atom was quivering with joy like the air on a heated hill-top. There was no more perplexity, nor trouble, nor sorrow. The golden age had come. All the leaves were of pure silver, and the flowers priceless gems; the very dust was precious, and the rain a diamond shower. How glad the world was! there was no unhappiness anywhere; and what supreme happiness was

hers ! and oh, poor auntie, who had lost, perhaps, even such delight ! What would she, Bethesda, do if she should lose it ? But she would not, she could not. All the peculiar circumstances that had brought her and René together could not occur twice, and his existence was now complete ; he himself had said it ! All else would be superfluous. And for herself ? Well, he trusted her, and he knew her marvellously well. She made no vows, but she thought he was not mistaken. They would trust one another.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘What the law of nature is in regard to matter the moral law is to man.’

‘Above all right and duty is love, leading lover and beloved to the pure unfolding of their natures. Woe to those who desecrate its divine mission.’—AUERBACH.

PERIODS of happiness are, they say, blank pages in history. Who indeed can describe the processes of growth, the blossoming of a plant, the details of a sunrise? Infinitesimal atoms meet and coalesce and vibrate and increase, and after a long period we perceive a colour. The vibrations quicken and intensify, and another hue becomes sensible to us. But who can trace the changing? who can see the subtle causes and the still subtler effects? Finally, when white light is achieved, what is it but dazzling radiance before

which our eyes fall, blurred, blinded, well-nigh destroyed through excess of sight?

René d'Isten was almost as much astounded as Bethesda at the effulgent joy which now broke upon them. He had of late known it must come, and had anticipated it with a calmness which left him all unprepared for the onslaught of rapture which assailed him. It was fiercely encroaching; it almost frightened him, and yet it was with a delicious fear. He was loved at last; loved by the fairest woman he had ever seen; loved by a noble character and a fine intellect. He was, yes, surely, he was content.

Bethesda was more; she was radiantly and gloriously happy. She asked nothing of life; existence had blossomed into its rarest flower and placed it in her hand. She was awed by its beauty; she was well-nigh overpowered by its fragrance. Each moment throbbed with a million hearts, which yet seemed incapable of containing her bliss. Her mind could not conceive its extent;

her being could not contain it. Over the whole world it spread, making her charitable, pitiful, tender to both joy and sorrow. Love could not come to her nature without thrilling its finest fibres. She began to understand what God's love must be like, which enwraps the universe in its warm folds.

Transcendently happy as she was, it made her only more commiserating to the trials of those not blessed as she was. Her aunt, Evra, Louise, were all bathed in a flood of sympathy for their deprivations. She could not be quite content unless her happiness was made to serve others, and she floated down from the heights of her ecstasy to do some trifling service for Mrs. Trescott with a bounteous grace never seen in her before.

Of course Mrs. Trescott noticed the change, for Beth grew more beautiful and stronger hour by hour. She never looked tired now ; her steps seemed winged in their elastic freedom ; her form

had lovelier curves, her flesh a softer lustre. Her eyes, thought René, were a shining iridescence of light over unknown and half-revealed depths ; her mouth was embodied tenderness.

Mabel asked her one day what had happened to make her so light-hearted ; were all her anxieties gone ?

‘ Yes,’ Bethesda affirmed with absolute sincerity, ‘ there is nothing more to fear. It is all settled and sure, and oh ! so restful ! I did not know it had been wearing on me until now the weight is gone.’

‘ How did it go, dear ?’

‘ All of itself, auntie,’ said Beth lightly. ‘ I don’t know quite how. I only know it is all clear now,—and do rejoice with me ! I am so, so happy !’

And Mabel did rejoice with her. It lifted much weight from Mrs. Trescott’s objections to see her niece so radiant and well. She knew that René loved Bethesda, and strongly suspected that

the love was reciprocated, although not acknowledged even to the girl's own heart ; and, desiring to give them as much pleasure as they could have, allowed them to be together a large portion of the time. They were happy now, she argued, and if the cost were large, it was too late not to pay it, and there was all the more reason why they should take its full value while they might.

René, knowing all, could not comprehend Mrs. Trescott's actions. He was aware that Bethesda had not told her aunt of the two notes, for he had gently insinuated the prudence of letting matters rest, and Bethesda was only too ready to do so. It was hardly ten days now before they left, and she had no doubt, no acknowledged doubt, but that her aunt, after a due amount of persuasion, would consent to this, as she had to all the rest. Her aunt could see all if she chose ; neither of them tried to conceal their spontaneous actions ; and since Mrs. Trescott did not speak, she probably did not positively either approve or disapprove.

Oftener and oftener now midnight found the three still together, and when one night, in some veiled surprise, Beth referred to their changed habits, Mabel said :

‘It is not often that such pleasant hours come in life, and I believe in taking the fulness of enjoyment from them while they last. I don’t care to sit up late just for the idea of it, but when there is anything that makes it worth while, no one is readier than I am to let time slip by unnoticed.’

‘You are a dear auntie !’

‘Am I ? Well, we are enjoying ourselves now, and on the steamer we can make up lost sleep—when René is no more with us.’

‘And what will I be doing then ?’ asked René, a trifle reproachfully.

‘Oh, you’ll have the peace to make with all your friends,’ said Mrs. Trescott. ‘How many of them have you neglected ? you, who used always to leave us at ten to attend to social duties ! Do

you remember that evening when you were going to some state affair and came in here just to show yourself in all your orders, and then never went after all? Tell me you won't have plenty to do in conciliating everybody!'

'I will succeed,' he answered confidently. 'My friends now think I am writing a book. They ask me each day how it progresses. I tell them: Well, very well.'

He smiled at Bethesda, and there was a merry peal of laughter.

'When you go away I shall have finished my first volume. Some will be eager to see it, but I shall make them wait until it is published. You see I shall be quite frank.'

'I wish you would be frank about everything,' said Mabel, a little soberly.

'And are we not, madame? Our companionship is as open as the daylight. We need not intrude details on all the world, but if they look they can see.'

‘Yes ; I suppose that is true. As long as our consciences are clear we need not inquire the opinions of others. If there is one thing I detest it is pandering to public opinion ! Life early took that weakness out of me.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Bethesda, a trifle wistfully. ‘I like the good opinion of every one. We were said in Florence, René, to be the only foreign women about whom there was no gossip. That gratified me exceedingly, I confess.’

René glanced at her with just a tinge of possible remorse. But the present was her own choice, and every moment bore witness to her happiness in it.

Often now René brought some manuscript for Bethesda to criticise to the parlour in the mornings, and as Mrs. Trescott was generally home, occupied with milliners and dressmakers, but still affording chaperonage, he was gladly invited in. Then they would take refuge in the deep embrasure of the window, near which was the desk,

and spend many happy hours oblivious of the chatter and bargaining going on without their charmed retreat.

Sometimes, in the interims, when the room would be for a few moments empty, René would press his lips to Bethesda's firm hand, now lying relaxed on the desk. Once his moustache brushed her hair as he looked over a paper she held, and it made her curiously faint. A few days before they left, in picking up a fallen book, the lithe man kissed her foot.

She started back at that, and looked at him with large eyes. His face was glowing. He stood very close to her and whispered :

‘I thought I never should abase myself to kiss a woman's foot, but I am proud to kiss yours.’

She moved away, not with coyness, nor indignation, but a feeling of solemn responsibility seizing her heart. Here was her woman's work, her duty was clear and imperative. She must leave him while he was in this state ; but he

must understand it was not anger, only rebuke. She turned when she reached her door and gave him a glance.

He darted after her as a needle to its magnet ; but she was too quick for him. With a leap of the heart which nearly stunned her she was in her room, and the door was close shut.

Then she fell on her knees and, for a moment, lost consciousness. The gnawing pain in her heart roused her. She did not mind it ; it was sweet to her. Was she not bearing it for him ?

‘Any other pleasures are not worth love’s pains ;’ and this is true even of corporeal pains. The terror Bethesda had always had of the disease which had killed her mother faded away in the desire to prove herself, by fire and sword, worthy of her love.

Here was now a palpable test. She who had been blind to nature before suddenly awakened to its terrible force. In her hands lay the controlling and guiding power of her own and an-

other's soul. She must, indeed, now, be his conscience ; and to be this she must follow her own. Their love, their life, their rectitude, depended upon her. The awful responsibility came near crushing her as she contemplated it and felt her weakness, felt the omnipotence this other will held over hers, and that, in its despite, she must save them both.

While she was dressing for dinner, a couple of hours afterwards, a white missive came under her door. Not a step was to be heard, but there it lay, and presently she stooped to lift it.

He had probably realised the delicacy of their position, and had written some apology.

She opened and read it, and the announcement of dinner came while she still stared at the glowing epistle. The words should have been traced in flame to express either the feelings of writer or receiver. For it was not an apology in the least. It was a revelling in imaginative visions, which wounded Bethesda to the quick.

‘Perhaps I should have gone to London,’ she murmured, as she held the letter to the candle flame. ‘Perhaps I have hurt him, been a temptress to him, my noble, pure René!’

There was something of the mother’s regret in her tone, of the mother’s forgiving solicitude. She would save him from himself.

A swift knock came at the parlour door. René had called for them to go down to dinner. She waited until she heard her aunt come out, and then joined them, keeping close beside Mrs. Trescott.

René instantly saw she was grieved, and took the hint she had given. He devoted himself to Madame Mabelle the whole evening. He directed all his conversation to her, not neglecting Bethesda, nor altering his manner enough for her aunt to notice it; and contriving, in an inimitable manner, to surround Bethesda with a sense of entire submission to her will.

What with this quick yielding, and discrimin-

ating devotion, her heart relented. She thought she had misjudged him. That she should be in fault here ! It was too cruelly mortifying ; she would never forgive herself.

So when they separated, a little earlier than common, he understood that his peace was made.

A couple of hours later M. d'Isten came down the stairs lightly. He could not sleep ; indeed, he had not tried, but since leaving the ladies had sat at his window watching the movement of the river silvered by the moon.

What had been his thoughts during that long reverie ? Not he himself could say. His mind was usually clear and precise even in silence ; but to-night it was different. He was letting his memory slip back and his imagination sweep forwards without any attempt to control either. He was in that dangerous state termed drifting.

Whither had the imperceptible waves carried him that he should now descend to the lower hall, and cast on the dim outline of familiar sur-

roundings an eager as well as pensive glance? Had the quiet quadrangle, with its closed doors and blank walls, taken the place of those inexorable banks which imprisoned the creeping waves? Or was he simply indulging a fancy for pacing up and down a larger space than his room afforded on this dreamy summer night?

He had made several slow turns, and was lingering in the window to breathe the cool night air, when his attention was called into sudden action by a sound in the room near which he stood. The door noiselessly opened, and, hiding himself behind the heavy curtains, he could see a slight figure in trailing white draperies go quickly along the hall to the parlour where he had passed so many delicious hours.

The door yielded to her hand, and she went in, leaving it ajar. From René's position he could see her cross the room and go to the desk where they so often consulted together. Paper after paper she took out and glanced over by the

brilliant moonlight. The attitudes she assumed, clearly cut against the soft radiance, were exquisite. Once or twice, with the little impatient gesture that was delightfully familiar to him, she tossed the mantle of her hair aside, and in falling its duskiness caught golden gleams that made it seem alive. Once in the midst of her search she stood quite still. He knew she was troubled. Was she thinking of him? grieving over something he had said or done, or something he had failed to say or do?

Finally she shut the desk with the same caution that had guarded all her movements. Was she going back to her chamber now, to sleep, to dream?

The perturbed watcher took a step forward in the comparative darkness caused by the closing of the door, but instantly shrank back. She had hesitated a moment, and was now coming to the very place where he stood.

He drew the draperies closer about him. The

sound of her garments on the wooden floor was the only one to be heard. The hum of the city sank into abeyance; the wind was suddenly still.

The man had a remarkable capacity for blotting himself out, of which he now made use to the uttermost, and the voluminous window-hangings aided him so successfully that there was not a thought in Bethesda's mind of any one being nearer than her aunt as she stepped into the embrasure.

The moon shone here also, and he could see, in illuminated distinctness, the soft pallor of her face and the tremulous curves of her mouth. She was thinking of him, surely; she was grieving with virgin sorrow over their inevitable separation; listening, in the silence of night, to the moan nature made deep beneath the brave spirit which accepted a maimed lot as unrivalled happiness.

Lovely, beloved Esda! her lot was joined to

his, to his unhappy destiny. Perhaps for the first time he let a feeling of bitterness towards Louise rise unchecked. That her weakness and petty ambition should have ruined the perfect union these two might have made !

But that was all past—an irrevocable past,—and he was going to be ‘unlike other men.’

‘*Ma chère, belle France!*’ murmured Bethesda.

She had been standing quite still, her eyes wandering from the sky and trees to those smooth links which had fascinated René a while ago. Now he was fascinated in another way. At her low exclamation his heart beat tumultuously ; he feared she would hear its quick throb. Would her sensitive ear allow him to escape undiscovered ? He hardly dared to breathe.

But she was absorbed in her own dreams. She did not hear the hurried heart-beats so near her own ; she did not feel the short breaths that almost touched her cheek ; but, peculiarly open to sympathetic influences as she was, she did feel

the magnetism of his presence. She moved a trifle, and leaned against the casement within a few inches of his breast. Her face was turned away ; she was so close that he could not see her figure, but only looked down upon her soft hair and brow.

He dared not look ! One slight movement would enfold her in his arms, and not reluctantly, perhaps ! That unconscious yielding to his presence !—it was maddening !

A long shudder passed over him, and his eyes closed.

The woman started upright. Had she heard anything, felt anything ? He did not know ; he could not care.

He did not see her scan the enclosure with a swift glance, nor witness the trembling of an uncomprehended fear, but he heard an uneasy half laugh, half sigh, as she moved quickly away.

When he again opened his eyes everything

was dim. A cloud had come over the moon, and the darkness was empty and chill.

He had to feel his way upstairs. He did not once look behind him. Perhaps he, too, was afraid of ghosts.

CHAPTER XVII.

‘Love is found to consist in the marriage of true minds, in a mutual surrender, in a mental correspondence, on which, in spite of time and death, constancy stamps the seal of immortality, and completeness impresses the semblance of infinitude.’—SIMPSON’S *Phil. of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*.

‘There may be men who take every moral height at a dash ; but to the most of us there must come moments when our wills can but just rise and walk in their sleep.’—GEO. W. CABLE.

THE next morning when M. d’Isten entered the parlour, he saw in an instant that Bethesda, sitting in the bay window, was, if not angry, subdued. He immediately crossed over to her and held out his hand.

‘Bon jour, Béthesda,’ he said, with a persuasive smile.

She did not refuse him her hand, but as the cold fingers lay in his she said low :

‘I must speak with you.’

He was alarmed by her manner, and with his usual skill had in a few moments arranged an excuse for a *tête-à-tête*.

‘Behold me at your orders,’ he said then gravely, standing before her. She motioned him to a chair, and in a low voice began abruptly :

‘Your letter yesterday made me sad, Réne. Even in imagination we must not go too far. Thought is free, you say ; yes, it is free, and therefore it should be so guided as to bring us the truest happiness. I am afraid we are both falling away from our first conception of this compact : A uniting of minds whose only aim was literary development.’

‘That was all,’ he said in a tone between a question and a reproach, while he watched her keenly. Would she fail him ?

‘You said,’ she continued, with downcast eyes, ‘that I helped you to recognise your trials for what they were, “the work of God.” There is

nothing you could say to give me more happiness than this. I wish always to be an aid, never a burden either in thought or action; but this cannot be unless we remember the circumstances in which we are placed and live accordingly; otherwise we must separate now.'

'Béthesda!' exclaimed René, in a low tone of pain.

'I am not angry,' said Bethesda hastily. 'Do not fancy that for a moment. I am only sad because it hurts me to give you pain, and yet I cannot do otherwise. I tried to think last evening I could let it slip by without saying anything, but it did not seem right. I wish you always for my friend, René; we are in a most difficult position; we must look closely where we step, and when your poetic fancy dazzles you with its impossible possibilities I must be clear-sighted, and turn you from the dangerous path.'

Perhaps the effect of such words as these, with their endeavour to recall cooler relations by

calling passion ‘poetic,’ and fervour ‘fancy’—by letting fall the snow of prudence on the fires of tumultuous feeling—can be somewhat imagined, coming to René after an apparition such as that of the night before, and the suppositions he had had of the fair ghost’s musings now so coldly belied.

He felt thwarted and hurt. If his emotions had not obscured his usual insight he might easily have seen the subdued yearning which underlay every sentence of the seemingly chill words; but no amount of insight could have taught him now so well as the imperious instinct he followed.

He bent before her without a word, lifted her hands to his trembling lips, and with swift steps left the enclosure and the apartment.

He remained in his room the whole morning, feeling keenly the poignancy of his position; feeling thrown back upon himself as nothing had ever made him feel before. It was not her

fault nor his, he told himself; there was nothing to conquer or evade. She was right; their cruel position constrained them, and the outstretched wings were clipped and cramped back into the cage.

At noon he let luncheon slip by unnoticed, and later, when he was obliged to go to the *ministère*, he stole downstairs with the utmost caution that Bethesda should not hear his step. He returned, looking haggard. Like Bethesda, mental agitation told quickly on his physique. He went to his room with a springless step, and let himself fall desolately into a chair.

A cynical observer might have said he was taking the luxury of misery, but he would have been unjust. René d'Isten's temperament was essentially poetic,—that is, he felt through the imagination as well as the emotions. Everything was heightened by this double focus. It was his misfortune in many cases, as it was his delight in others. His tendency was to go to

extremes, and only by the necessary education of exact self-government had this quality been subdued. Now, in the relaxation of severe discipline, it had its revenge, and his trouble was not exaggerated but intensely felt.

He went down to dinner before any one else, took a plate of soup, and hurried away. He could not eat, and he did not wish to meet any one. The ladies knew he had an engagement that evening which must be fulfilled. It had been often deplored in advance; now, he was grateful for it. He could not endure to enter their accustomed circle with the necessity of repression upon him.

Yet he longed inexpressibly to see Bethesda. The tears stood in his eyes as he went blindly upstairs. He heard the parlour door open and then their voices. Mabel was wondering where René was, and looking up and down the stairs for him.

No retreat was possible. He stepped into a

recess to make way for them, and to be in the shade. As Mabel swept past, thinking he would, of course, follow them, she said reproachfully :

‘ Why didn’t you wait for us ? ’

He did not answer, and Bethesda looked up in quick alarm, all the fears of the day crystallised in an instant.

Her searching glance called him forth from silence and shadow. She saw his pallid face with lines of pain heavily drawn upon it, and she stopped at once.

‘ I have been to dinner,’ he said in a husky voice.

‘ Can I do nothing for you ? ’ she exclaimed from her heart. ‘ What has happened ? ’

Her yearning eyes were fixed upon him, and the tears sprang to his very eyelids in reply.

‘ I cannot say,’ he murmured ; ‘ only, do not grieve.’

Then, with a wild impulse of absolute sub-

mission, he took her hand as she stood above him, and, bending low, laid it upon his head.

A second later he sprang past her, and ran upstairs.

Bethesda joined her aunt, her brain in a whirl. Was she the cause of all this suffering ; she, who would not hurt him for worlds ?

‘Where is René ?’ asked Mrs. Trescott, surprised to see her alone.

Bethesda composed herself to answer, and shield him.

‘He has had his dinner. He is going out, you remember, and took it early.’

The evening, so rare to be spent alone, was lonely.

‘Dear me, how we shall miss René !’ sighed Mabel, and Bethesda shuddered.

Before she slept she wrote him wildly, beseeching him not to think her cruel, that she was as much hurt as he ; more, since she had to deal the blow. ‘Be the same as before your last

letter ; those were happy days. I cling close to my friends ; even if unwise, I cling close to you. Don't hold me away !'

She despatched this in the morning by the servant who brought her coffee ; and René answered it immediately, a delicate, deferential, yet tender letter, which added much to Bethesda's admiration for him. He was always so ready to admit a mistake, so fearlessly humble ; and to think that she should hold the reins of such a nature !

When they met René's old manner was entirely restored. A healthier reaction had set in before he received Bethesda's letter, and that, with its clinging dependence, never fully evidenced before, compensated him for the misunderstanding, which, after all, was not entirely pain.

He knew well that a stream cannot be turned backwards by any slight means ; and that a fall, no matter how short, makes the current surer

and swifter for a while. How often had Bethesda fondly imagined a few words would restore the waters to their tiny spring, there to be safely contained, and never, oh, never, to overflow again !

René knew better. The spring had made a stream, and the stream a river ; the current was strong, the waters many ; it must inevitably flow into the sea ; indeed, it was already exchanging its onward current for the recurrent tide. What Bethesda mistook for a turning of the flood in an old direction was but the ebb of an everlasting sea ; and the ebb was only a gathering of forces for the new flow.

Slowly, imperceptibly to her, yet how fatally swift ! the tide crept up. What had been at one time forbidden or deplored was now accepted without a thought ; what had been the cause of gentle rebuke was now an unquestioned pleasure. The shining ripples played about Bethesda's feet, and she delighted in them, standing on the shore

of that fatal sea. The spray shone crystal-clear, and threw itself lightly to her lips, her eyes; she brushed it away at first, then enjoyed the fresh free touch, and let it blind her sight.

The waves crept higher, and she threw herself in a delicious rapture on the smooth surface, and let herself drift with them to feel their buoyancy and strength. She did not doubt an instant but that she could touch her feet, and the waves would, in any case, carry her back presently; and she smiled at the receding shore.

It all seemed to her so peaceful and calm that she could not believe it was fraught with the most imminent danger. The mighty power to which she and René were now equally subdued asserted its supremacy over all circumstances, over all adventitious facts. Thought was free; love was free; sympathy of mind and heart could not be chained; it over-arched all as the sky does trees, and shrubs, and men.

But deeds could be controlled. Here the

clear-sighted resolve of a lifetime strengthened René to obey what he knew was right in Bethesda's prohibitions, and the intuitive cleaving to purity held Bethesda to moral action.

The terrible undertow of passion they did not recognise at the time. It was only an instinctive effort that they made to keep on the surface; and the waters were exquisitely beautiful, and elastic, and strong; and soon, oh, so cruelly soon! they were to take separate paths along the shore, and might never be again together. Let them enjoy it while they could, since life would be dry hereafter.

Their separation was, indeed, now drawing very near, and already darkened their hopes.

‘I shall come to America, do not fear,’ said René, for Bethesda was haunted with a horrible sense of the frailty of their imaginative fabric. ‘I shall come,’ he repeated. ‘Every step I advance in my career will bring me nearer to the day when I shall meet you there. Trust me,

Esda ; before many years I will be in the *corps diplomatique* of Washington.'

Bethesda did not reply. She had often wondered why it was that René looked forward to the coming years with so much less apprehension and intolerable weariness than herself.

After much veiled scrutiny and careful study, however, through a judgment unobscured by pique—for she was of a large enough nature to give gold for silver and never count the cost—she came to the conclusion that it was because he had long looked forward hopelessly, decades stretching before him in sterile monotony, and that now he saw them transfigured by a warm light, and blossoming with all the delectable flowers of sympathy, so that, naturally, the change was only a delight.

With herself, she thought quite simply, it was different.

When she once comprehended this she listened without fear, but feeling a strange sense of in-

competence in understanding, to his plans for six, eight, ten, twenty years ahead. Was she going to live all these alone? Her mind refused to grasp the sum of this enormous debt. It was just as well, better indeed, that it did. We can take step after step for a long time, but if we had to leap them all at once,—well, we should probably break our necks.

‘Remember, Esda,’ said René, after a pause, ‘remember, thou must never desert me. Promise me that if thou art ill unto death, thou wilt send for me. From the farthest point of the earth I will come to thee.’

‘It might not be right. Never let me interfere with duty. But auntie is the one to ask for that.’

‘I will, to-night.’

‘And if you are ill?’

‘Thou shalt know it, and when I die, all our letters and papers will be sent to you. I have arranged it. I can make myself obeyed even in death.’

In spite of these lugubrious conversations the last days were happy ones. René, except in moments on which he refused to let himself dwell, felt his life full. And Bethesda felt that pain slept while he was present. Deep in her consciousness she was aware of something ready to spring upon her like a wild, ravenous beast, but now it was chained, and she turned her back upon it.

Mrs. Trescott was sick at heart in watching her. Without knowing that the girl recognised it, she did know that René d'Isten held her darling's love, and she cried out passionately against the sorrow and suffering such a lot would bring. The girl had changed before her eyes. She was no longer her little niece; she was a deep-souled woman, with wide capacities which no one knew. Even Mrs. Trescott doubted if she knew her thoroughly now. And extraordinary natures must be extraordinarily treated. A few days, and this dangerous intimacy would cease; a couple of weeks, and the ocean would

gradually divide these characters now being welded into one.

With cruel celerity the last day approached. It was the evening before their departure, and at an early hour next morning the train would leave. Mrs. Trescott was in her travelling dress, but Bethesda wore a black dress, long, and plain, with deep lace cuffs and collar, from which her head rose, on its full throat, unusually severe and classical.

She was looking every inch a queen o'er herself, and yet René knew what turbulent vassals she had to control.

He could not believe the hour was so near; but he braced himself to bear the inevitable with his usual firmness. When they went how much happiness would they leave behind them! Paris would no longer be the same hollow city, with an empty heart beneath its gaiety.

He said something of the kind; he knew it would comfort Bethesda, and he knew, too, she

needed comfort. Her large eyes shone upon him, now, in the deep devotion which yet did not wholly fill their capacity.

‘You are happier for our coming, René?’ she said, the least bit wistfully.

He answered by holding out his hand towards her across the table. She put hers in it, thimble, needle, and all.

‘Are you not afraid of my pricking you?’

‘I know you would not hurt me.’

‘True,’ she replied, with undue solemnity. ‘The needle would have to pierce my finger before it reached yours.’

‘Such a remark should come from René,’ said Mrs. Trescott. ‘He should be the one to save the other pain.’

‘Of course he would; but need I be behind him in it? A woman may suffer to save, as well as a man.’

‘You will be your husband’s slave yet, with such notions, Beth.’

‘I think not, auntie,’ said Bethesda gravely, letting her eyes fall, and drawing away her hand.

‘A man loves a woman just in proportion to the amount she exacts from him. If you accept all, and do nothing, he will be absolutely devoted.’

‘I would prefer losing love than degrading myself to obtain it.’

‘You’ll get over all that when you are dependent on a man’s affections. You’ll have to learn wisdom then. When you marry we’ll see.’

‘I shall never marry.’

‘How are you going to avoid it, Esda?’ asked René, quietly.

‘How?’ was the startled response. ‘What do you mean? I can decline if need be, I suppose.’

‘But what if Madame Mabelle should marry again, and you should be left alone?’

‘There is Margaret, and Aunt Agatha too.’

But Margaret and I could easily live alone together, if it were necessary.'

'She may marry too.'

'Well, I am not incapable of living entirely alone. Others have done it, and I can. Certainly, nothing should force me into a marriage contrary to my inclinations. I despise——'

She broke off short. She had been about, inadvertently, to blame Louise. But René did not notice the abrupt termination, for he was thinking deeply.

'Oh, see the moon,' exclaimed Mabel just then, and she went to the window. 'Come, Beth,' she cried; 'look at our last European moon.'

The others rose at this, and joined her. The sky was still bright with the sunset reflections, and the slender crescent was reaping in a green field.

'I shall never see the western glories henceforth,' said René, 'without remembering that they are caused by the treasure beneath the sky.'

‘ Oh, if you are going to talk poetry I will withdraw !’ exclaimed Mabel, and went back to her seat restlessly.

There was a little pause on the balcony, then René whispered :

‘ Thou art like the moon, Esda, and thou drawest me in every drop of my veins, as the moon draws the sea.’

She did not reply, but her face was eloquent.

Presently she began to say :

‘ You know sometimes it is said that the old moon is in the arms of the new, and that the effect is caused by the earth’s light shining on the shadowed portion, and the sun’s light on the other. There’s a little lesson in science for you, and here’s one—in a deeper science perhaps. You can think, if you like, when you see the moon so, that where others shine on me, and where you shine on me, René, there is the same difference.’

Her voice sank to a pathetic loveliness in the

last words, and René felt almost a sense of awe at the thought of his having, for ever, this woman's devotion.

‘I am as far from you, Esda, as Endymion from Diana,’ he said, somewhat sadly ; and he did not even touch her hand.

‘Three weeks from day after to-morrow,’ remarked Mrs. Trescott, as they returned to the parlour, ‘we will be with Margaret and Agatha. I would like to see you try to win her over,’ she added abruptly, ‘if she didn't take a fancy to you, René.’

He laughed a little, as he asked :

‘Is she so very obdurate?’

‘No cajoling could cloud her judgment an instant,’ was the decided answer.

‘That is hardly the way René would take to win her esteem,’ remarked Bethesda. ‘She is eminently one whose respect can be commanded, for she is very just.’

René gave her a sharp glance, and presently

led her to talk about this Aunt Agatha and her husband. It was highly advisable that he should know as much as possible of the characters with which he would have to deal in meeting Bethesda in America.

These two might be somewhat formidable, he soon surmised, but he had no fear. Bethesda was bound to him by all the fidelity of her nature; he believed she would rather leave all her friends than cast him off; and within a few months she would be her own mistress, and with money at her arbitrary command. He did not hesitate to look clearly in the face the possibility of her living alone—with some staid chaperone, of course—alienated from her friends, because of her devotion to him. His ideal woman would rather suffer this than submit to any strictures on her love; and, with all his experience, he had come to have such confidence in Bethesda that he believed her to exemplify his ideal in every respect.

But this life alone was only a matter of extreme emergency. She had tact ; he counselled her, directly and indirectly, to use it. There was no need of offending her family ; no sacrifice would be asked if she concealed what little Madame Mabelle did not know, and go her own way without consulting others.

He stimulated her ambition also, both as woman and as artist. He wished her to shine in society ; to take her place as queen of her peers. He desired to have increasing cause to be proud of her, and to think that this beautiful, cultured woman, whom many adored, was inalienably his. The more renowned she became, the loftier grew his station ; the more suitors she refused, the more triumph for him. She should be a brilliant woman, and a woman of intellect, and, in both positions, feel her dependence on him.

She was not slow in responding to the carefully concocted excitant. If she wondered at

his lack of jealousy, she argued that it only proved his absolute faith in her, and no vows were needed in her determination to be worthy of such trust.

At no time were the anxieties and embarrassments of the life she had planned, ignored. Neither were the shadows and sorrows unrecognised; indeed, she comforted herself with the thought that, since life can never be unmixed joy, the very rocks in her path were assurances of its stability. Were it otherwise, it would be too ethereal to endure.

The transmutation of forces gained mutually by René and Bethesda caused him to feel far more deeply than even before, and had developed in her the use of her eyes. No longer was one to be controlled by simple intelligence, or the other by intuition. They exchanged their distinguishing masculine and feminine attributes, and each partook of the strength of the other. In seeking Bethesda's intellect René

had been roused to the enthusiasm of her emotional nature, and that now inundated all primary aims. In responding to the claims of René's intellect, hence finding the need of reason and discrimination, Bethesda developed her natural capacities with rapidity. Through her he found the passion which warms; through him she found the reason which steadies. She no longer was tossed from this to that, but had some things in which she could trust, some ideas by which she could hold firm; and his life was no longer that of an observer from a lonely standpoint, but the intense existence of eager participation, striving for the best.

Such were they to one another, and now they were to separate.

The last evening lingered, and refortified itself, and lingered again. How could they break it off? But, finally, Mrs. Trescott insisted on prudence, called attention to Beth's weariness, and reminded them of the fact that to-

morrow they would meet at an early hour. So the last good-nights were said, and René left.

Bethesda proceeded to gather up her work in silence, and with an unconquerable languor; Mabel, watching her, did not even dare say, Be brave! for fear the recognition of her trial would overpower her. It was hard now, but once away, once in America, matters would change; she was confident of that. Beth was a girl naturally absorbed by the present, she reasoned; the future would be a new present, and she would be absorbed by that. It may be seen that Mrs. Trescott's philosophy was easy, and, fitting herself, fitted every one else, in her opinion, equally well.

When Bethesda bade her good-night, and went out into the now dark hall, and was just about to open her own door, a voice close beside her said softly :

‘ Esda ! ’

She started, but made no sound.

‘I could not leave you so, this last night,’ whispered René. ‘Tell me now, Esda, good-night.’

He held both her hands in his, and drew her towards him. For a moment she did not resist. She was longing for paralysis, for death, for anything that would not tear her away.

Then she conquered her weakness, and stood upright, disengaging even her hands. He allowed it, but said in a tone of reproach her name again.

‘Oh, René!’ she exclaimed, in an agonised whisper; ‘I cannot bear it!’

‘Courage!’ he said, startled by her voice. ‘We will never be apart. And now, only good-night!’

He had secured her hand as she thrust it from her, in the sudden access of despair, and pressed it to his forehead, and eyes, and mouth. He knelt before her in the glimmering darkness, and laid the soft palm on his head—a

proud head that had never bowed to any one but her.

‘I am all yours, Esda,’ he said solemnly, as if taking a vow.

His outstretched arms sank until they formed a circle around her feet; he pressed his lips to one arched instep, and then the other; and she, wildly, let him do it. Her whole soul was in a tumult, a deafening uproar of passion and woe; and yet not a sound escaped into the still night.

At last, with a violent effort, she moved, and said, in accents he never forgot:

‘Go! Go!’

He sprang to his feet, without touching so much as a fold of her long black robes, and she, laboriously, painfully, turned and entered her room.

Not a word was spoken, and before the door closed he went quickly away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘She felt like one locked in the Garden of Eden all alone—alone with all the ravishing flowers, alone with all the lions and tigers. She wished she had told the secret when it was small. . . . At first it had been but a garland, then it had become a chain, now it was a ball and chain.’—GEO. W. CABLE.

‘No one can save you but yourself, for no one can so often tell you the truth.’—AUERBACH.

RENÉ went with his friends as far as Calais, and as the train sped through their dear France with a swiftness Bethesda longed unceasingly to clog, a quietude in her companions made Mabel declare she would try a nap. René assisted her to make herself comfortable, and then returned to his seat beside Bethesda. She was pale this morning, but brave, and René kept constantly in both their minds the fact that she or her aunt should have a daily good-morning from him

while in England, and frequent letters in America; and Bethesda responded to it all with an eagerness to be hopeful that was akin to pain.

There came a somewhat serious pause at last, however, which Bethesda broke by saying:

‘Who would ever have thought we should like one another, from the way we first met? Do you know, auntie has never told me what that quarrel was?’

‘Don’t speak of it! It was a foolish affair; I cannot understand myself in it—now.’

‘Had you not better tell me?’ asked Bethesda, a grave trust in her voice. ‘Auntie will be sure to make me know some time. I have already avoided it many times. I thought perhaps you would rather I should hear it first from you.’

‘My invaluable guide!’ exclaimed René. But he hesitated; his brows contracted, and he flushed a little. Then he said: ‘Yes; I will tell it to my conscience. She should know all. It was a

small thing, but it makes me ashamed, especially before your eyes.'

'Therefore I ought to know it; yes?'

Her manner was of the gentlest, and expressed a desire to do only what was truest for him. He fully appreciated it; but it was no easy task his conscience required of him. However, with a new imperious instinct, he did as she bade him.

'When I first met your aunt,' he began hurriedly, 'Louise had left me only long enough for me to feel my loneliness and bitter disappointment, and yet not sufficient time had elapsed for me to have become accustomed to my position. Then there was a something, I know not what, about Madame Mabelle which puzzled me. I know now it was the contrast of American and French customs, which I did not appreciate in its real extent. Well, I took her at last as my confidante, for an imaginative fancy for some being whom I wished I might know and love. The quality of exaggeration which you are aware she

possesses made this seem to her very wicked. She knew I was married—she knew nothing more. She took the matter far more seriously than I ever meant it, and she became extremely angry, and wrote that she renounced me with scorn for ever. I do not pretend to defend myself; but I could not bear the imputation she had put upon me. I determined to meet her and eradicate that impression, for I knew it was only the weakness of a weak moment. Now, I blush at my folly; I hate it as much as you can do, Esda. It was like talking in my sleep; I did not know what I said,—and then you came and wakened me.'

'I am glad you told me,' said Bethesda, when he had finished.

'You are not angry, dear Esda?' asked René, leaning forward to look full in her face. She raised her eyes to his without hesitation.

'No, I am not in the least angry.'

'And you do not blame me—very severely?'

‘I am your conscience,’ she said, with a faint smile. ‘I blame you no more than it.’ After a moment’s pause she added: ‘It was weak, but I believe, as you say, it was only momentary. You asked forgiveness of yourself, as well as of Aunt Mabel. In the future it can be forgotten.’

‘Yes, we will not think of it more,’ he answered, with a long breath. ‘I am relieved that you know it, but now it may fall into oblivion. Give me your hand a moment, Esda.’

She put her gloved hand in his with her usual sweet dignity, and the train sped on several miles while silence joined instead of separating them.

Presently Mrs. Trescott roused herself, and then came Calais, and the blue, foamy Channel.

‘To-morrow a letter from me will be crossing it,’ said René, seeing Bethesda blanch.

‘And in two weeks or less we will be on the ocean,’ added Bethesda.

With her all this was but the prelude. Where

the Channel would now interfere with their meeting the interminable ocean would divide them then. But she strove to be brave, and succeeded. She still defied that hungry beast of grief, stealthily creeping towards her, ready to spring.

As the boat cast off she threw back her head proudly, and looked to the land with shining eyes. He was on the quay, and she on the vessel, and the blue waters grew wider and wider between them, who perhaps would never meet again. It was only the beginning, she knew, but her face was quiet, even glad. How great was her gain! Immeasurable; imponderable. Grief could have little effect upon it.

And René stood watching her, so beautiful, so graceful, so brave, until he longed to leap to her, never again to part. Each throb of the engine, each turn of the wheel, seemed to hit and hurt him as long as he could hear or see. And, as he turned away at last, when the ship had become

a speck, and the smoke was all that could be distinguished, he felt a *serrement du cœur* which frightened him.

She had taken not only herself away, which meant much, but she was draining his veins of their life-blood by her absence. He commenced now to understand that this unity of life means pain as well as joy ; that to disintegrate a double spiritual life is like disintegrating a physical life, which produces agony. She had suffered it all a thousand times in anticipation ; he, man-like, did not know what it meant until it was upon him. But he had to endure it at its worst now, while she was counting over the treasure she had amassed, and finding it golden.

In London Evra and Mrs. Conover were at the station to welcome them, and when they reached the house everything was cosy and bright. It was almost like a home-coming, so warm were the motherly cares of Mrs. Conover and the tender solitudes of Evra. Indeed, to

Bethesda it was but a foretaste, as each incident had been since they left Paris.

Mrs. Trescott was lodged in a stately room upstairs, but Evra carried Bethesda off to her own room, and, showing a dainty boudoir beyond, said :

‘Here, darling, you are to share these with me. Now, no denying, sweet ; you would break my heart. I know you like to sleep alone, so I have had a little bed put in the dressing-room. It is comfortable, but I hope sometimes you will be persuaded to make me a little visit. Now, let me look at you ; I have not had a chance yet. My loveliest of women ! I did not remember you were so beautiful, and yet I have only dreamed of you since we parted.’

She caught Bethesda to her in a passionate embrace. The girl submitted at first, then freed herself with a slight shudder.

‘What is the matter ?’ asked Evra quickly.

‘Oh, I am so tired !’

‘ True, dear ; I should have remembered. May I help you ? You will let me be maid ? I wouldn’t lift a finger for myself, but for you !——’

Bethesda yielded, more submissively than gladly. She felt a miserable sense of inadequacy before this frank and craving love. She was barren of the power of giving, because she was asked too much. It was, as it had always been, with this difference : now her capacity for passionate devotion had been tested, and found ample ; and still there was none—none of the kind asked—for Guinevere.

The supple lady served Bethesda with swiftness and delight ; occasionally a little awkward in her humble position, but only sufficiently so to occasion a laugh now and then, which made feeling between them less tense and healthier. They chatted incessantly meanwhile ; Evra with an excited pleasure in being able to talk once more to this queen of her heart,—Bethesda eagerly, not to let a pause come.

Just as they were leaving the room Bethesda, fresh as a dewy tea rose in her Parisian toilette, her hair showing all its character beside Evra's golden curls, as it showed its sunniness beside M. d'Isten's dark head, and a new dignity and repose in her carriage, Evra turned towards her and seized both hands, scrutinising her an instant.

‘Lily, there is something new come to you. Don't deny it. You are not the same as you were. You shall tell me to-night,’ and without allowing Bethesda to speak, she drew the girl's hand through her arm and led her into the parlour.

Soon after dinner some callers were announced, much to Evra's vexation, but they had to be admitted, and the evening passed very agreeably to Bethesda in music and conversation. When the last guest left Mrs. Trescott bade the others a tired good-night, warning the girls not to talk too long.

‘Leave your confidences until to-morrow,’ she said; but when were girls ever known to follow such wise advice?

Bethesda would gladly have done so; she dreaded the next two hours inexpressibly. Only the night before had her limbs been weighted by that faintness which a woman surmounts with a half-numbed struggle, such as an opium-eater feels when fearing to succumb to his fatal drug. So much had happened since then, and here was another trial to endure.

But to-morrow she would rest; to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow! How many days were before her! Not even one had passed yet, and it seemed æons of time; for the long years to come weighed upon these moments, and made each seem crushing in its excessive heaviness. After all, perhaps it was as well that she should be actively employed, and not be left to her thoughts.

Presently the two white figures were seated

in the dim parlour, face to face. They were both silent for a while. Bethesda was waiting, bracing herself, and slowly succumbing to a half-remorseful pity. Guinevere was feeling intensely, sending word after word back from her lips to seek the one that should not offend and yet should lead to enlightenment.

At last, with a sudden impulse that shattered the impotence of her strivings, she laid her hand over Bethesda's, and broke out in a suppressed and choking voice :

‘Tell me, Lily, what has changed you?’

‘Am I changed? How, dear?’

She was no longer apprehensive. She might reserve a part of the truth, but this true friend should know a part also. She felt herself the stronger of the two. The woman, with her myriad resources, had replaced the inexperienced girl.

Meantime Evra answered her questions passionately.

‘How? Why, in everything; in yourself, Beth. You are not what you were. You turn the same face to me, but I cannot reach you, you are so far away. You are unapproachable,’ her voice fell with a hopeless break in it; ‘I shall never reach you. Before, there was a chance; now, there is none.’

Her head sank on the arm of the *causeuse*, and lay there helpless and forlorn.

Bethesda did not attempt to answer her half-incoherent utterances, but she laid her hand on the golden tangle caressingly, and kept silence, while every echo of the impassioned words died away. Then, very low, she said:

‘Dear, I will tell you why I am changed. I have renounced definitely all thought of marrying.’

‘But why?’ asked Evra, straining her eyes to read the fair face so near her.

‘I have decided it is best; why, I cannot say. I can only tell you this: I go home to think only of my writing.’

‘And is this sadness—for you are sad, darling—because you have determined this?’

‘Perhaps.’

The little word trembled away into stillness before another was said. It was a peculiar faculty that Bethesda possessed of making commonplace expressions contain the meaning of her own nature. Guinevere keenly appreciated it.

‘If you are so sorry,’ she ventured presently; but Bethesda interrupted her.

‘It is done, dear.’

‘So you are to be a vestal virgin,’ resumed Evra after a pause, a pause that said much. ‘It is what you should be, dear; you were made for it. No one person ought to monopolise you.’

‘I think I have been living towards this from my cradle,’ said Bethesda in a far-away tone.

‘We are only closer together for this, pet,’ said Evra, bending forward to take Beth in her arms. But she was prevented.

‘I am further from all my friends for this;

further from all I have heretofore known. My work will unite me to all those who work, but personally——’

‘You will have adoring friends, of whom I shall be the first,’ interrupted Evra. ‘We are alike in many things; we must give one another mutual aid; we will never marry, but we will always be friends, and, dear knows, I need one enough!’

She showed her relief by immediately beginning to talk of her own affairs.

She had had a trying time in Milan, but had been successful. She had met the man to whom she had once been engaged, and her whole nature shrank from him in a crawling repulsion. He had done everything he could to injure her, and finally climaxed his insults by offering her again his hand, which she must accept as the price of his desisting from an active enmity. She had of course refused it with scorn, and had finally triumphed by being engaged for the next

London season. The whole affair had worn upon her, however, and given her a fierce contempt for human nature, which made her look upon Bethesda Hamilton as the one pure, true soul in the universe.

The remainder of the *tête-à-tête* passed easily, and the sitting broke up in the wee hours, both relieved if weary. But the following week was most trying to Bethesda. Evra could not endure a moment out of her sight. Callers were snubbed, and all but the most important engagements broken, because she was determined to extract every possible drop of companionship out of these fast-fleeting hours. Bethesda felt an uneasiness almost amounting to pain in this exigent intercourse. How was she to conceal her feelings from so suspicious and passionate an adorer? For her whole existence inwardly was now absorbed in longing. The beast did not spring upon her, but numbed her at times into a deadly anguish. Misery, too deep and black to be

accounted for, engulfed her in its resistless waves. Resistance, indeed, was impossible; passivity alone was left.

To Evra she accounted for this by physical fatigue, and begged her not to worry Mrs. Trescott with it, and Mabel suspected nothing of it. They saw one another comparatively little, as she still had some shopping to do peculiar to London, and, absorbed in her own affairs, fancied Beth led an easy, enjoyable life, while the hard work was kept from her. And Bethesda called on her pride to an unlimited extent in seeming happy before her aunt. She would have considered it an unforgivable sin to let a suspicion suggest itself that the new interest in her life was other than unalloyed delight. Moreover, this curious black oppression that suffocated her at times seemed alien and causeless. It came upon her without reason, and left her likewise. To lay it to the charge of her rare happiness would have been the extreme of illogical foolish-

ness in her opinion ; but had it been otherwise, she would not have wavered an instant in thinking she was happy beyond most.

The only lightings of real relief that came to these alternations of smothered struggle and smothering despair were when René's letters arrived. They usually came before Evra was up in the morning, and when the maid appeared, bearing on her salver the welcome epistle, what a *réveille* sounded in Bethesda's ears ! All the bat-like horrors hastened away, and joyous daylight reigned supreme.

‘ When I look at the sky luminous with stars, or at all that God has made the symbol of His omnipotence, I see nothing that shines in immensity as thou dost in my existence. Picture to thyself a man as he prays before the altar absorbed in devotion. He is penetrated by God, and adores Him. In this moment I am enwrapped in a similar enthusiasm. I adore God, but through Béthesda.’

Such words as these came in detached pages of the letters Beth handed to her aunt. They were marked 'Béthesda,' and thus were free from oversight. From the girl herself half their sweetness was stolen by this concealment, but she let it serve her purpose. She laid the blame all on society. Love was pure; their love was pure. Had he been unmarried, every one would have considered the two eminently suited to one another, as her aunt often declared; and Bethesda had unconsciously fallen into the position of considering René d'Isten virtually unmarried. Only superficially did society hold him to Louise. Interiorly society could not bind him, and here he could give himself to her, as he did and should. But with the rights of Louise Bethesda had no thought of interfering. Just in so far as she recognised them she respected them. She and René would take what remained, and what made her great happiness; no matter what *tristesse* might lurk beneath, she

was profoundly grateful. For there was in the deepest earnestness of Bethesda's nature a devotion which made all suffering in its service insignificant. Those who, even through martyrdom, gained the heights of self-sacrifice in some great cause, she looked upon with reverence as enviable beings.

Mabel Trescott, on the other hand, was very willing to lead an easy life if fate would let her. The ecstasies of self-abnegation, the delight of self-development at any cost, did not appeal to her so much as comfort and quiet every-day living.

Could there have been a greater contrast? One straining after the high, far stars of absolute truth and love, regardless of her footing; the other wrapped, Cleopatra-like, in the Oriental folds of a luxurious ease, which in spite of desires could not give her content. And it seemed the very irony of fate that the one to swerve from rectitude of life was she who had its highest

ideals and strived with earnest purpose to embody them.

Meanwhile some curious renewals of old experiences linked the present to the past.

One day a box came to Miss Hamilton from her bankers. It was some five feet square, and marked from Italy. Interest was high as the four gathered round it, and presently when it was discovered to be a picture, frame and all, Mrs. Conover remarked :

‘My dear, I believe it is a parting gift from Signor Straora.’

The last wrappers were undone, and the canvas was lifted out. Bethesda flushed as she saw it, and was silent; but the others compensated by their exclamations.

It was a two-thirds portrait of Bethesda; and yet it was not alone a portrait but a type. The artist seemed to have seized the spirit of past centuries, whose meaning is constantly recurring in the individual development of humanity.

There was a suggestion of the most ancient of civilisations in the straight lines of the chair in which the figure was seated; the white robe, disclosing faultless neck and arms, had a broidered zone around the waist which Isis might have worn; and the hair was so caught that it seemed precisely the girl's way of arranging it at the same time that it recalled something beyond and before the classic.

There was no denying that it was an admirable picture. Evra went into raptures over it; Mrs. Trescott congratulated herself that she had forwarded its accomplishment, and even Bethesda recognised herself and something æons before herself in it. The eyes, which met the spectators' fully, yet inscrutably, fascinated her. She found herself constantly trying to elucidate their character.

They were yearning, and mysterious, and haunting in a certain undefined pathos. She thought if Signor Straora should see her now he

would find that changed ; her yearning satisfied, her mystery revealed. Yet was it ? Was there not something deeper and larger than the most complete individual life could satisfy ? The connection of all humanity with this one human soul made her see herself greater and smaller than ever before. The marriage of minds was eternal as the ages and the spirit which vivified them ; but could any one person absolutely satisfy another ? She was an atom, and yet she was an integral part of her race, which are ‘as gods ;’ could, then, another atom fill her whole being ?

Here she pushed thought away, as *léze majesté*. She would not listen to treason, she asseverated, but her mind inevitably returned to the same idea.

No one thing could have taken the teacher’s part in this dim time so effectively as this inanimate canvas ; and Signor Straora, in his loneliness, and the aching void which had been left anew by the despatch of this semblance of his wondrous maiden, would have been content had

he seen Bethesda in some solitary hour, leaning on the table before his painting, and trying to find her way, with its help, into the depths of self.

No word came from the sender of this precious gift, but Bethesda and Mrs. Trescott both wrote him. Bethesda's letter was a curious betrayal of the intimacy the picture had established between the artist and his model :—

‘I have always wished,’ she wrote, ‘that I could have an objective ideal towards which I could live, and have sometimes wondered if a portrait depicting my best qualities in their full development would not inspire me to improvement. You have seized the very kernel of my thought, but have presented it in a new way. You have given me myself, my possibilities, as a problem to be solved. I shall not be content until I have explained the mysteries you indicate. The Sphinx must speak, if but a whisper in my ear ; and then we shall see if you can find that answer !’

CHAPTER XIX.

‘Then my soul went out to him. . . . And where there had been selfish pride before, was written Rāma ; and where there had been hope, or joy, or beauty, was written Rāma ; and where there had been dreams of unknown bliss, was written Rāma ; and where there had been God and heaven, was written Rāma.’—*Iliad of the East*.

‘There cannot be a pinch in death more sharp than this is.’

Cymbeline.

ONE morning, two days before Mrs. Trescott and Bethesda expected to leave London, a letter came from René to Bethesda. She had incidentally mentioned in one of her letters that they were going to hear Patti that evening, and he now declared that this (?) attraction made it impossible for him to stay longer in Paris, and that he would arrive by the night boat, and appear in the box as a surprise to Madame Mabelle ; but he could

not keep it as a surprise for one who must know all his actions and divine every thought.

This letter was handed Bethesda when she was just awake, and she felt her brain whirl as she thought he was already in the city! To-night I shall see him! To-night! her heart cried.

Then she bethought herself. He must not be allowed to stay in the city all day and they not meet, no indeed! He had mentioned the hotel where he would stop, and she would take the responsibility of asking him to breakfast. It was a very irregular meal, which each one generally took at a different time; she usually alone. Perhaps this morning she would not be alone!

After sending her message she flitted around like a humming-bird. Every fear and vestige of gloom had fled. The vague stirrings towards a new life were charmed into slumber by this renewal of loved bonds. She had half expected

some such sudden decision on René's part. In his place she would have done the same, and now her secret impatience gave colour to her cheeks, and winged her footsteps, as if by moving quickly even around the house she could hasten towards him.

When she went into the parlour she ran up to her portrait and fluttered the letter before its insistent eyes. 'Now, *now* you will be satisfied!' she exclaimed.

But, as she waited, she found herself too often confronted by that questioning glance which finally turned into a reproach, so that at last she caught up a shawl, and threw it over the face.

'There!' she exclaimed aloud, and tried to forget it.

The clock must surely be wrong; she had said nine, and it was now only a quarter after eight. No, her own snail-like watch agreed with it. Now time was so long, and how swift it

would fly if he were there! Why couldn't the long moments be given then, and the short ones now?

She stopped her impatient steps before the mirror; did she really look like that haunting picture? A slender figure, all in white, with a crimson rose against the throat; a head exultantly carried; a fair face, with dark eyes shining joyously, was what she saw. She could not help smiling as she tucked back a wilful lock of hair. It surely was more golden than usual to-day, because it knew he liked it so.

Hark! a carriage! And stopping here! She rushed towards the door to run and meet him, but the thought of the servants deterred her. She forced herself to sit down and open a book. The letters were gigantic, and grew dark and light before her eyes.

She rose as he came in, but she could hardly stand; and, as soon as the door closed, he sprang forward, and bowed before her, and clasped and kissed the little hands nestling in his.

Then he led her to a sofa, and they sat down side by side. Before long—in a moment, it seemed—the servant returned to announce breakfast. Bethesda, now restored to quick thoughtfulness, sent the maid to see if Mrs. Conover was up, and sped herself to Mrs. Trencott.

‘Auntie! auntie!’ she cried, and, in her first wakening, Mabel guessed René had come.

‘You dazzle me like a sunbeam, child. Run down, and take breakfast. Don’t wait for me. You must both be hungry,’ she said, when told of the surprise.

‘Hungry!’ exclaimed Beth, but she was off with childlike impetuosity.

René found her, in this sweet excitement, simply entrancing. The ordinary English breakfast was a feast for gods waited upon by her. The little hands fluttered about the china and silver like self-important birds, and the coffee that ensued was nectar.

A dozen times he rose when the waiter was gone on the pretext of passing her things, just to have her throw back her head and look up at him, with the clear, joyous, loving soul in her eyes. The morrow's parting was forgotten in to-day's reunion.

When they finished Bethesda excused herself to call Guinevere; her daily duty, as she explained, 'and I must not neglect it, for she is dreadfully jealous.'

'And what am I?' asked René, smiling.

'I don't think you could be jealous of me,' she replied simply. As he opened the door for her he bowed reverently. No; one who held her heart had no cause to be jealous.

When Bethesda returned to the parlour Mrs. Trescott was with René. She had thrown off the shawl from Bethesda's portrait, and René was studying it keenly.

'Well?' said Bethesda, somewhat nervously.

'It is not—Esda,' he said, in a rather sharp

tone, which softened curiously in pronouncing her name.

‘No, it is not like me now, is it?’ she cried.

The strange, haunting, rebuking eyes checked the warm blood in her veins. She looked appealingly at René, and he gave her a warm reassuring gaze.

‘I have not seen you so—of late. It is beautiful, but too solemn for one who is happy. It is not our sunny Béthesda, and we will hide it away again.’

The girl gave a sigh of relief as just then Mrs. Conover came in and welcomed M. d’Isten cordially. Evra soon joined them also, but her courteous phrases were a little cool. She at once proceeded to tuck Bethesda under her arm with a claiming authority, and Monsieur d’Isten devoted himself discreetly to Mrs. Trescott.

The ladies were to leave on Wednesday afternoon to catch the steamer, which sailed on Thursday too early for the morning train. M. d’Isten

asserted he should not leave them until the last minute now. They pressed the Conovers to accompany them also, part of the way at least, but Mrs. Conover took Bethesda aside, and represented to her how important it was that Evra should be in the city, until the plan was reluctantly relinquished.

Guinevere during these last days was silently unhappy. She felt hurt, thrown back upon herself, and bitterly disappointed in this longed-for visit. She could not have told the reason for this, and when Bethesda came with the little caresses that would have been glad to comfort and please her, Evra would stifle what she then termed her miserable suspicions, and try to satisfy her hunger on this meagre food.

The evening before their departure the party broke up late, and when the others had retired Bethesda and Guinevere lingered together, talking not altogether easily for a while. At last Evra rose abruptly, and bringing a finely-carved box

unlocked it, and showed Bethesda its contents—her own letters.

‘These are what I have read and re-read, night after night, child,’ she said, with a mournful accent, ‘even since you have been here.’

Bethesda looked at her, dazed and remorseful. If they only had let her speak, at least of the literary compact, she might perhaps have made the change better understood. Neither René nor Mabel had approved, however, and she yielded. Now she wished she had not, but the affair told at this juncture would take on undue proportions, or would tell more than she could tell, for her secrets were entwined with another’s, and she must guard his honour even more carefully than her own.

So she said nothing. In a moment the cover fell, and Guinevere turned the key, and moved to go.

Bethesda sprang after her. She could not endure this silence. She laid her hands on the

tall shoulders before her and lifted her face in the full blaze of the chandelier.

‘Evra,’ she said, ‘do you trust me?’

‘Next to God,’ was the solemn reply.

‘Then listen,’ spoke Bethesda breathlessly.

‘I cannot tell you what has changed me; that I am changed you quickly discovered, but that is something of which I dare not speak. I ask you to rest in this: I am as true to you as I ever was; I am no more unworthy your love than I always have been. Love me, Evra, dear, and don’t be afraid that there is not a large, warm place in my heart for you, whatever its changes.’

Her eyes were deep, and shining with a deeper purpose. Evra’s were swimming in tears.

‘I do believe you,’ she said, winding her arms around the girl. ‘I believe you and love you; how much, God only knows.’

The hours came in swift succession. Hardly had the good-nights been said, it seemed, than the good-mornings were to say. The two girls went

into the parlour the next morning arm-in-arm. There was a closer feeling between them than at any time since they had parted in Florence, but they were both subdued. Guinevere was oppressed by the sense of the long separation to come, and Bethesda was insensibly allowing the undercurrent of her life, during this fortnight, to come to the light of recognition. All this was only the overture—the overture where the wailing sorrow to come is foretold, and the mind prepared for a tragedy.

Alas, only until to-morrow !

As they waited for the train in the station Guinevere held her Lily with a painful grasp ; and when they were off the last thing Bethesda saw was a pale face set in golden curls, whose features were drawn with pain. It haunted her for long, with a dim sense of being unworthy of such affection. But the next farewell ?

When they reached Liverpool they found Marcot, who had been engaged by the ladies for

their American home, had secured them pleasant rooms, and M. d'Isten outdid himself in surrounding the ladies with delicate attentions. The fact that he had them once more to himself was evidently satisfactory to him.

To Bethesda, too, it was a rest, and when presently René proposed reading aloud to them, nothing could seem to have been more happily chosen, as it suited the fatigued indolence of Mrs. Trescott as well as Bethesda.

The piece he had selected was a eulogy of women; sincere and ardently poetical, and he read it with fervour. Instances of devotion were gathered from every land, and as they were told Bethesda felt the power to do each one. Still she felt strangely within herself the capacity of being more utterly filled. She wished the thought of René to fill every recess, each small and large space in her soul, as air would any vacancy, and she was perplexed that her love did not make it so.

But of one thing she was sure; she was in-

separably bound to him, and through life and eternity nothing but unworthiness could separate them.

He looked up from his book as she thought this, and found Bethesda's eyes shining on him with a glory of surrender. She had risen in the last few moments, and now stood by the mantel, leaning upon it. As she met his eyes he sprang to his feet and would have thrown himself at hers, had they been alone. As it was he turned away abruptly to regain his startled self-control.

Why should she feel differently to him to-night than ever before? he asked himself. Why should she now, just now, when they were about to part, melt the incomparable pearls of her nature in one peerless draught, and offer it to him with such imperial grace?

Why, indeed, except just because they were about to part, and the woman's heart cried passionately:

‘These are the last moments; we may never

see each other more. Let our spirits meet now while they may.'

In her rapture, in her almost agonised rapture, she could have rejoiced had there been some supreme way in which she could prove her love and so die. Shrink from what other women have done? Rather, their acts were miserably petty; yet she envied them! They could at least prove their love to all the world, but she must seal her lips, and hide what she would have been proud to proclaim to every creature. And their eyes meeting, both realised at this moment that death would be the dearest boon of life.

They went on board early the next day, and as René felt the little quiver of Esda's hand he said cheerily:

'The next time I am on an ocean steamer will be coming to you. You can rest in my coming.'

And Esda clung closer to his arm, resting on the present, in any case, whatever she might do on the future.

The two were constantly together ; they promenaded the deck arm-in-arm, and talked and laughed quite as if a week were still before them, only in Bethesda's mind there was that half-insane, half-numbed sense that soon she would awake with the grip of a monster agony at her heart. She said nothing of it, however, and her conversation and appearance were as bright and sunny as the rippling abysses of the sea.

René did not surmise what she felt, for he felt nothing of the kind. Last night's anguish had passed for him, and the future, if not all sunshine, had never looked so surely happy to him as now. He could look forward to tens and twenties of years, and see that same light shining on his existence still, that same immutable tenderness permeating his being, and rendering everything it touched beautiful and sweet. He was a man of strong habits, and the wearisomeness of continuity was never to be feared with him ; rather,

the longer he possessed a thing the more attached he became to it. And there was a rarity about Bethesda Hamilton which made him well aware he should never find her equal ; indeed, had he not been seeking her in vain for thirty years ? He had never spoken a truer word than when he said she completed his existence.

This completeness, too, was not disturbed by what he considered the inevitable fate of their walking their paths separately, divided even by the sea. For he was not a dishonourable man. Brought up in the surroundings and traditions of his country, such a passionate *amitié* as this had become was, to his conscience, no sin. It was more than excusable, it was justifiable, even praiseworthy. He occupied precisely the same position to his wife that he had done for years, and one she had deliberately chosen ; he wronged no one. Bethesda was entirely free ; he claimed nothing from her. What she gave he accepted as the bounty of a generous heart ; what he gave

to her was, as she had told him, and he was glad to believe, her greatest joy.

That she should not marry could not, with his experience, seem any great sacrifice, and she would not be lonely with her sister, her writing, and the knowledge that he was always devoted to her. The whole matter seemed to him inalienably settled; it could not be altered now; no one could interfere. They had agreed together that they should not take any one's word but each other's in regard to their relations, and thus all misunderstandings were definitely precluded.

They were so engrossed with one another that they noticed no one on board, although most of the accumulating six hundred souls who weighted the vessel had seen and commented on them. No wonder that both thought Mrs. Trescott guessed their open secret when outsiders saw through it at a glance. No wonder, either, that they thought she did not disapprove when she left them alone

as much as possible, while appearing as affectionate to both as she had ever been.

René was, perhaps, more guarded than Bethesda, but only because he thought Madame Mabelle might not care to acknowledge what she did not mind countenancing indirectly,—and then he understood her to think also, that time and absence would change all this, and that she was willing to rest in this security.

He was, too. He smiled to think how harmless these enemies of mankind would be to him and Esda.

A shrill whistle blew. René, with Bethesda clinging closer and closer to his arm, went to inquire when the fatal moment would arrive.

‘All friends leave immediately! Ship sails in five minutes,’ answered the officer.

They hastened to the lower deck, and René kissed Mrs. Trescott’s gloved hands without a word. Then he caught Bethesda’s, from which she had drawn the glove, and put the soft palm

over lips and eyes. Only an instant, but during it they both blanched terribly. With one foot on the gangway, and still holding her hand in his unbreakable clasp, he waited until the last person had left. Then he sprang to the little deck below, and the two stood gazing at one another with dry eyes, while the distance widened slowly, implacably, then swifter and swifter, until they were lost to sight.

PART II.

‘ Yet more, life’s music holdeth more than these, . . .
There is a golden chord whose harmonies
Have deeper echoes ; . . .
Our lips will smile, although our eyes are wet,
Till we life’s earnest mystery have solved ;
And then, weak heart, . . .
Know that the soul which breathes immortal breath,
Stronger than joy, stronger than grief, must be,
And trample both, to reach, O God, to Thee !’

ISA BLAGDEN.

CHAPTER I.

‘To train people to be men by keeping them children, to train people to be free except by making them free, by letting them bear the consequences of their sins and mistakes, is seen to be more and more of an impossibility. What does the whole history of the world mean, but that it is impossible,—even to God?’

OF all outward experiences, there is nothing like a sea-voyage to wrench one from old associations and habits of life. The long silence of every friend; the weary, dreary passage, where one is conscious that each turn of the screw takes one farther from what one loves, and fastens the distance with unevadable decision,—this is a close enough symbol of death; and another land, bearing a general similarity to the past, yet with every part changed, is recognisable as our idea of what a new life may be.

Bethesda found this true as she went up on deck, just at dawn, the morning they reached New York. A still, calm gloom environed the ship, allowing faint outlines of the low hills to be seen. They had cast anchor, and were waiting for daylight to steam into dock. The cessation of sound and movement had given her a dizzy sensation, after the long rocking and straining of the vessel, and she had come upstairs to see if the fresh air would not dissipate it. What a voyage it had been! Not stormy in the elements; the trip had, on the contrary, been a very calm and swift one; but what a battlefield of murderous spiritual conflict this ship represented! In every corner she saw the face of some dead hope, the ghost of some ghastly agony.

When she had left Europe, and watched René's figure grow less and less as distance widened between them, she had at least felt secure of a mental unity which abolished space.

They were to write frequently and thus would be still held together by a palpable means of communication. But now, alas! she knew the letter below, ready to be mailed, was the last she would write him for six months; perhaps the last open-hearted one she would ever write him.

This bitter change had been brought about ostensibly by Mrs. Trescott. She had only waited for Beth to rouse herself from what was more a swoon than a slumber into which she had fallen on the day they left England, to accuse her of deceit in concealing from her trusting aunt her own knowledge that she loved René d'Isten.

The fact that both the man and woman knew it had flashed upon Mabel during that last, hard good-bye, and she had been thinking of it, with a cumulative rancour, while Bethesda lay for hours wan and half lifeless before her.

She had failed in action, she had trusted too

much, she told herself; she would not so fail or trust again. This affair must be seen in its true light at all hazards. She would use her authority as a knife, if need were. 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out,' was one of her favourite pieces of advice. She did not notice that the Bible command is couched in such language that it makes the plucking out of an offending eye a matter of self-subjection, of free-will, not of compulsion. She thought it emphatically her duty to pluck out her niece's organ of sight, so dimmed and unreliable was it, and then the girl might lend herself more docilely to her aunt's guidance, which was the only road to salvation out of this swamp of evil into which Beth had sunk.

'Where did this begin?' she had broken out abruptly one day. 'In London? In Paris? Have you deceived me for weeks, and if so, how far? Oh, Beth! am I awake, or in a nightmare, that I can say such things and you not deny

them? Do you know that he is married, *married*, I say, and do you know nothing of the world? Heavens, assure me of *something*, Beth, or I shall go mad!

‘Of what do you accuse me?’ said Bethesda. Her figure was drawn to its full height, and her brows were a single tense line above eyes whose expression made even Mabel Trescott speechless.

‘Of nothing, nothing,’ she said at last brokenly. ‘I only ask you, what am I to believe?’

Bethesda felt a sentiment of pity and self-rebuke begin to dilute her indignation. She remained silent a few moments, thinking fast. René and she had agreed together that if concealment was not wrong, deception was, and now she ought no longer to remain silent. Since Mrs. Trescott had gone so far beyond the truth, Bethesda decided that it was best for all concerned that she should be frank.

She was so; completely as far as facts were

concerned, and there was a sense of freedom and upright defiance in speaking openly of what it had been a trial to her to conceal, even passively. She had consented to keep silent from motives of expediency alone, not from any sense of shame or guilt. She told her aunt, indeed, that she would be proud to have the angels in heaven look at her connection with René, and felt assured they would not disapprove. It was only the pettiness and earthiness of this world which had made them see fit not to proclaim it on the house-tops, if need were.

Mrs. Trescott listened sombrely. She knew Beth was speaking the truth. She saw she was ignorant as to the wrong of this, that her conscience was perverted; but her darling was still innocent and pure. It was an error, a misapprehension, into which she had been unconsciously led, perhaps by an unconscious hand. The lofty tone in which Beth mentioned René impressed Mabel with an involuntary sense of his worthi-

ness, which she was the more ready to accept from not believing it possible she could have been so mistaken in her confidence in him.

‘It is a hideous wrong,’ she said, when Bethesda had finished. ‘I cannot understand your lack of perception, still less his. But that it is only blindness I see. You must be guided by me now : it is your only safety. I will go and think about it. The next step may be into an abyss or to safety.’

Mrs. Trescott left her, and Bethesda had leaned against the railing at the stern, and watched the seething waves, with thoughts which were incoherent and restless and perturbed as they. The pristine clearness of her mind was beaten to an opaque mass by the repeated shocks of circumstance against emotion. It seemed to her that the whirling, eddying, foaming track would deafen her with its conflict ; and yet she must be quick to hear both the voices within and without, and to distinguish which edicts were the right.

Something within her was meantime working slowly, laboriously, to an unseen end. It was as if her heart were a besieged garrison, and the dull thud of toilers in an underground mine should half reach her ear. Every sense must be on the alert, and yet she knew not which way to look for danger. As such a garrison would, however, visit every foot of wall and tower to discover any hidden weakness, so she visited the fortifications built around her heart, and was forced to admit that there were many places not impregnable.

Once conscious of this, she hastened to take treacherous conscience from the side of her foes by writing to René, and expressing her dissatisfaction in remembering their actions during the last days they were together.

‘I believe you felt this as well as I,’ she wrote. ‘You did not find me keeping you on a high plane as you would have desired me ideally to have done. I should have had clearer per-

ception, and been less blinded by emotion. I was, on the contrary, less clear-sighted than you. And I believe, deep in your mind, you blame me for it, as you should. Once I said to you—do you remember?—that we were not to forgive any evil, even to one another, until the wrongdoing had been repented. Now I repeat it, René. You must not forgive me, I must not forgive you, until we have proved our repentance for the errors we have committed.'

It was when she had just finished writing this that Marcot brought her a message from Mrs. Trescott, who wished to see her downstairs. When she reached the close state-room she found Mabel sitting on the sofa with a portentous face. She made place for Bethesda beside her, and tried to take her hand. The girl evaded it. There was something in her aunt's manner which proved caresses only sugar-plums to buy some desired action, and Beth proudly resented being treated in so childish a manner.

‘ You wanted me ? ’ she said.

Mabel bent forward and looked in Beth’s face, while she tried to broach the subject in an easier manner. But Bethesda was on the defensive, and reiterated her question briefly.

‘ Yes, I did want you ; I do want you,’ then returned Mabel ; ‘ I am yearning to do for you.’

‘ To do what ? ’ asked Bethesda.

‘ Well, I will tell you,’ began her aunt, and stopped.

Bethesda waited, with clear observant eyes on her companion’s face.

‘ Beth,’ commenced Mabel again, this time in hurried accents, ‘ you have often said you loved me, that you would like some way to prove your affection and gratitude to me. Now I ask you for the greatest proof you can give.’ She waited a moment, with one of those impressive pauses which often italicise silence as well as speech. Then she went on : ‘ This between you and René seems dreadfully wrong to me ; absolutely wicked.

The past we cannot alter, but for the future you are responsible. You cannot judge clearly now, so I ask you for one year not to write to René, to let entire silence reign between you ; and this, darling, because of your love for me.'

Bethesda sat staring at her, wounded, stunned. How could she thus destroy for ever, perhaps, the happiness of two lives ? And yet the long love for her aunt, the keen desire to prove herself not wanting in this crucial test, made her heart bleed on every side.

She could not speak at all for a while, and Mabel lavished caresses on her with a fondness not free from terror.

'Go away, please,' said Bethesda at last, with unconscious authority ; 'I must have a chance to think.' And Mrs. Trescott, taken aback, found herself to her own surprise obedient.

Presently Bethesda had slipped quietly up on deck and told Marcot to bring her portfolio without disturbing Mrs. Trescott. The man obeyed

with a respectful solicitude which always reminded her of René. He had told her that Marcot had been a faithful retainer of his, and at his request she had said no one else should know it. Now she felt him an innocent link with the past, and it comforted her to think that through Marcot's devotion to René he was quick in observance of her own wishes.

After a little the fresh wind, the strong air, and salt expanse cleared the blurring mist of incapacity which had shrouded her mind, and she seemed to have a wide gray level in it, similar to that spreading beneath and around her. A sunbeam would have flawed it; a bird's wing would have hurt it; a ship would have destroyed it. In the lifeless calm she thought it out.

From their arrival in America until the New Year she would sacrifice to her aunt all communication with René. This would assure Aunt Mabel of her deep devotion, and would serve the same

purpose that a longer probation would ; for what questions could not one solve in six interminable months ? And she acknowledged there were doubts to be solved ; she told René so.

‘ During these months,’ she wrote, ‘ we are to earnestly try to judge our past dispassionately, and see the light of truth on our future. This I believe we equally wish to do. You, no more than I, would live wilfully in the dark, covering our eyes from the sunlight. Our positions towards one another are too delicate for any but elevated minds to understand ; should we not make it a rule to command their respect ? Can we afford to lose one atom of self-respect, or respect for each other ? I am sure you will answer these questions as I do. The only real question is : Where is the wrong ? I cannot decide. I am sure of nothing, except our mutual confidence, which is as this ship bearing us across a sea of waves, the only thing steadfast on the tumultuous ocean. It does not lose its integrity and solidity, no

matter how it is rocked ; and I believe it will bear us safely to port at last.'

She put away the sheet, and went with a light firm step to her aunt's side.

'I have decided,' she said.

Mrs. Trescott glanced quickly into the pale face, whose dark eyes shone starry with self-conquest.

'I knew you would do right !' she exclaimed, catching Beth's hand and kissing it rapturously. 'I knew you would do as I said.'

'Yes,' said Bethesda in a low clear tone. 'I have told René that he must not write me, after his answer to this letter, until the first of next January. Neither shall I write to him until then, after we reach America.'

'But that is only half as long as I asked,' said Mabel. Her clasp on Beth's hand loosened, and Miss Hamilton drew it quite away as she replied with steady determination :

'It is all I can give ; and it is long enough for

anything you can desire. Do you remember, Aunt Mabel, that it is only four days since we left René ?' She paused a moment to collect her strength for the next words. 'You must know,' she said then, 'that it seems to me a cruel thing that you have asked ; unnecessary, and destructive, perhaps, of two lives' happiness. I tell you this plainly, auntie, because I wish you to realise that I do as you ask me, even when it is hardest.'

Mabel kissed her hand again, and said fondly :

'I do see you love me, darling, and I think you are a very noble woman. But it is a frightfully short time, only six months. Won't you make it the year, dear ? It is not much,—a year in a young life like yours.'

'It is not much, did you say ?' asked Bethesda, in an incredulous tone.

'No ; if there were objections to a marriage, a daughter would always wait a year, and think how much worse this is !——'

‘I have given you a proof of my love written in my heart’s blood,’ said Bethesda, ‘and you consider it nothing! I can do no more, and what I have done is useless.’

Then, feeling the despairing inutility of more words, she went away.

It was this which made the voyage so hard. No concession brought peace, but, on the contrary, Mrs. Trescott’s appetite seemed to grow with what it fed upon. She ceaselessly encroached. Bethesda was thrown to and fro, beaten by Mrs. Trescott’s ever-unsatisfied demands, until she felt herself, and all about her, dividing, and shattering, and writhing into new forms, which were no sooner made than destroyed.

If she could only have been left to herself these days the constant incursion of new thoughts, springing from the very nature of her relation to René, would have enlightened her without arousing resistance. But Mabel was

indefatigable in her efforts to pluck out her niece's offending eye, until at last Bethesda barricaded herself from assault by announcing that she would make no more concessions whatsoever, and that what her aunt wished must be asked of René, not of her. Nothing would stir her from this position, and Mabel finally desisted, to throw her whole strength into a letter to René, urging him, by his knowledge of the world, his generosity, his love itself, to accord the year's silence which Beth had refused.

The evening before reaching port Bethesda had written him with a heart-wrung abandon, realising that it was her last opportunity of speaking to him freely for many dreary months; possibly, just possibly, for ever.

‘We are alone in the world together,’ she wrote. ‘We are outside the limits of society, and our only aim should be to keep our conscience free, our lives noble. Remember, René, I do not think it any gift of mine, that you hold

my faith ; I do not give it, it *is* yours. Nothing can alter this fact. You are to remember it through all these months,—to begin, for me, so soon !’

It was this poignant sense of last moments which had been all through their peculiar temptation. The consequences of present acts seemed to be cut off short by the iron hand of circumstance, which, from the first, they knew must inexorably separate them. Had it not been for these outward compulsions Bethesda would have more quickly recognised the importance of self-subjection. She was now becoming dimly conscious, through suffering, that free-will, rightly trained, is the aim of the whole discipline of life.

The day grew silently around her as she stood this last morning on the upper deck, thinking of what the voyage had brought her, and what it had taken away. A deep purple, lightening to amethyst and dull gold, then flushing to a soft rose, replaced the grayness of

the east. The responsive waters brightened into opaline hues, with fire gleaming under the pearly ripples. The sky grew more and more brilliant; a few floating clouds were touched into flame, and the water answered with iridescent fervour. Finally, a golden hand of dazzling glory curved itself from the horizon to the zenith, while the water, thrilled to ecstasy, ran quivering towards the shore of the New World. Another instant, and, with a burst of splendour which thrilled like an organ peal through every nerve, the sun rose and beat down Bethesda's eyes with its shining.

Presently they were in sight of the city, sparkling in the level sunbeams, where, Bethesda knew, Margaret was awaiting them; asleep, probably, and yet impatient for their arrival.

Already the new protecting element was coming into her life as she thought of the fair-haired sister, who had always been so dear to her, and now, in her innocence and devotion,

peculiarly appealed to Bethesda's lacerated heart. It pacified her to remember that Margaret knew nothing of these last weeks of intense passionate life. The story of even the literary compact with René had been reserved until they should meet face to face, and now, perhaps, it would never be told. Ah, well, it would be restful to be with some one who did not know too much ; it would be good, and sweet, and comforting. Margaret would trust her ; Margaret could trust her. There should be no doubt of that.

What a thrill of familiar tenderness stirred Bethesda's heart as she espied her sister and Aunt Agatha actually on the pier, in spite of the early hour ! It was totally unlike any of the emotions which had made her vital existence of late. It was the warmth of home affections and home knowledge ; of the unspoken communion of memories, and of temperaments long accustomed to one another. It was simply, and all, of a family, and a sister, and a native land.

They went ashore, and Margaret cried a little as she held Beth fast, and Bethesda tranquillised her with her own eyes moist. Agatha Stanhope meantime saw that the girl had been living ahead of her strength, and that she had been experiencing far more than a mere year would account for, and she embraced her with a supporting tenderness. Then they all went off to see about the luggage, and, finally, to the hotel.

‘You are to rest here until to-morrow evening, when we will go home,’ said Agatha, with her usual decision and searching glances at every one in turn. She saw now what made her address Mabel directly. ‘You will like to come? You have no plans to conflict with this? I have promised myself that we would make one another’s acquaintance there, and the girls would console themselves for their long separation.’

The rupture between the elder sisters had been bridged over roughly, leaving the chasm

yawning beneath, but making it possible for them to meet in apparent amity. An affection of habit had mingled with the veering tendency of Mabel's mind to effect this, while with Agatha love and confidence were strong enough to arch over many fissures, and unite even deeply-divided lands. Moreover, she could with difficulty believe that the strange stream between her and Mabel would not fade away like a mirage as soon as nearness should prove its existence or unreality. It would therefore be hard to describe the keenness of her disappointment in seeing the unanswering chill in Mabel's manner.

‘It is very kind of you to ask us to your house,’ she began now, formally. ‘I supposed you had already left S——. Isn't it terribly hot there? I expected to go somewhere on the coast, the girls and I, and that you and Raleigh would, perhaps, join us later. But it was very good of you to come on here, if you were intend-

ing to go right back,' she added, with a sudden impulse, and one of her warm smiles.

'I wished to see you,' replied Agatha, with some quiet emphasis. 'I think you will be quite comfortable with me for a week, or a month as far as that goes. I, of course, stay there as long as Raleigh does. But I would not urge you; you must do just as you prefer.'

She stood with a certain royalty in her carriage and a keen light in her eyes during the instant's silence which followed. Bethesda was about to speak, but was silenced by a flying glance from Mrs. Stanhope. This was a matter between her and her sister; she was sure of the girls.

'Well, thank you, perhaps it will be best,' said Mabel, after that eloquent pause. Agatha turned with a sigh of relief and a quick gentleness to Bethesda.

'What do you say?'

'I don't need to speak,' replied Beth, with a

dainty caress. 'You know how glad I am to be with you.'

Mrs. Trescott moved away with some impatience.

'Beth ought to rest now,' she said abruptly; and they all adjourned to their rooms. Mrs. Stanhope went around softly after the girls were on the bed, adjusting the blinds and closing the mosquito bars, and petting them with that unobtrusive care which proves the habit of consideration for others. It was new and charming to Bethesda, and she found herself, to her own surprise, going to sleep more easily than for weeks. The tender serenity of Mrs. Stanhope's face was always before her, and in her arms nestled Margaret, softly breathing. As the fair head rose and fell on Bethesda's breast she felt as if she had taken refuge in a sanctuary, a divine stronghold where no enemy could reach to injure her. She was protected by the sweet power of an undoubted innocence.

CHAPTER II.

‘The great moral combat between human life
And each human soul must be single. The strife
None may share, though by all its results may be known,
When the soul arms for battle, she goes forth alone.’

OWEN MEREDITH.

‘To foster and develop good in all its forms is his vocation.’

KUNO FISCHER.

THE next evening they started for S——. Their party was a genial and cosy one. Mrs. Stanhope had travelled so much that the cars had become a second home to her, and she knew how to make the porters and officials as attentive as her own domestics would have been.

Poor Marcot, who was quite confused and dazed by all this new life and strange customs, was useless, and felt himself so ; and Bethesda, with a smile, dismissed him to his own car.

‘What did you bring him home for?’ asked Margaret; and Agatha remarked:

‘I should not have been surprised at it in Mabel; she is so foreign I have difficulty in understanding her——’

‘But, Agatha!’ remonstrated Mrs. Trescott.

‘It’s true,’ asseverated Mrs. Stanhope, ‘and I should have thought it quite fitting had you brought home a French servant; but I hear it was Beth’s idea.’

‘Yes; she came back from here full of the notion. She thought it would be quite *distingué* to have a *garçon*, and was looking out for one in Italy, but we found none. There was one creature there who would be just a pleasure to have in the room, a perfect Adonis, you know, but I told Beth it would never do. He couldn’t be kept in his position here, you see; he would have become insufferably vain. You don’t see such handsome men in America as in Europe, especially Southern Europe, and, *en revanche*,

you see nowhere such pretty women as in America. *Ma foi!* what a number of them there are! Why, at the Windsor, there were at least half a dozen girls who would be stared at from every corner on the Continent, and here they seem to be considered nothing remarkable. *A propos*, how do you think Beth is looking?’

A sudden anxiety betrayed itself in her words as she turned to look at her sister, who had been studying her quietly.

‘Beth is not well,’ said Agatha gravely; ‘she seems worn and harassed. She is not looking nearly so well as you do. The voyage must have agreed with you.’

‘Hum! And yet I have had all the hard work while Beth was resting in London. But she is tired now. Travelling fatigues her. Why, how English this looks!’ she exclaimed, breaking off from her former speech abruptly.

They were going up the Hudson River, and the daylight was yet sufficient to show them the

beautiful banks covered with parks and country seats. Mabel leaned across the car to attract the girls' attention.

'Wouldn't you like to live somewhere here in the summer? It would remind you, Beth, of Mrs. Randleth; and Clarence might come some time to row you up and down the Hudson instead of the Thames.'

'He never did that, and I fancy he never will this,' replied Bethesda indifferently.

Mrs. Stanhope noted the tone. She and Margaret had heard of this Clarence, and Agatha was seeking a reason for Beth's change. It evidently was not here.

'But wouldn't you like a summer place here, even without that inducement?' insisted Mabel. 'There! that house, *par exemple*. Shall we take it, girls?'

'I had rather not talk about plans now,' said Bethesda. 'Aunt Agatha told us to rest first, and I feel like obeying her.'

She leaned back in her seat wearily, and the loving eyes of Margaret were quick to discover it, and to see the look of troubled sadness which replaced all other expression in Bethesda's face during any lull of interest. There was something here which Margaret would leave to time to explain, or would trust to Beth without explanation. She was one of those with whom absolute confidence is the kernel of love.

All night and the following day they sped on through the strangely familiar land. They talked much, exchanging experiences—the lighter ones—telling anecdotes of travel and home life; of friends to one only, or old mutual acquaintances; of new thoughts; of memories; in fine, enjoying that renewal of old associations with congenial friends, and gauging their development, which is, to sensitive minds, a fragrant delight.

But Bethesda felt herself, at times, a stranger here. It was as if she had come with a carefully-stored memory of unimportant personal events,

and the names of friends, to foist herself on them as a Bethesda Hamilton they once knew. Then, suddenly, shaming this alienation, would come a flood of tenderness, of affection, of gratitude to these dear ones, and she would give them some mute caress as an apology, or a frank acknowledgment of her feeling; at least to Mrs. Stanhope.

‘It will come back,’ said Agatha once. ‘We must try to be patient, my dear; then some day, perhaps, these years that have intervened will be as strange to you as this is now.’

‘Oh no!’ exclaimed Bethesda, with a startled shrinking; ‘that could not be.’

‘Perhaps not,’ replied Agatha, wisely not insisting. ‘You are different than you were last year, Beth. America did not seem so unfamiliar to you then, and yet you had been longer without seeing it.’

‘I know I have changed, Aunt Agatha. I am trying to find my way to the why of it all,’ she

went on uncertainly. ‘I think it began when I came home last year; that is the way it looks to me now. Somehow, it all disappointed me; not you, dear auntie, nor Margaret, nor anything about you, which, indeed, delighted me as much as the rest dissatisfied me. I suppose I had some foolish ideal of my country which was merely a girlish notion; but the current of American life was not as pure and simple as I had expected to find it. It had lost its pristine clearness, and yet had not reached the stage of filtering, and so what I saw was turbid, I thought; at any rate, distasteful. Probably my view was very superficial and inappreciative. I have too much faith in America not to believe it was my mistake, but it influenced me strongly. I went back to Europe really feeling that was more natural to me than America, that it was to Europe I belonged. I think—I think that was where it began.’

She ended more undecidedly than she had

commenced, and looked with a certain appeal at Mrs. Stanhope's reliable face. It would inspire confidence in any one ; every line and curve of it, as of her mind, was nobly proportioned, so that one felt no pettiness obscured her judgment or interfered with her large charity. She was pre-eminently one who helped others to help themselves, and Bethesda needed such assistance sorely then.

The silence grew quite long, however, before Agatha spoke.

'I was thinking of your mother,' she said then. 'You are like her in many ways. I remember when you were born your eyes went following the light around the room as soon as they opened. I told her of it, and she said : "I trust my little daughter will always follow the light." They were almost the last words she said.'

Mrs. Stanhope spoke with an undertone of feeling and comprehension which made the familiar story take on a startling meaning to Beth-

esda's seeking mind. Of course Aunt Mabel had often told it to her, but now—— Why, it was like a voice from Heaven, and that voice a mother's!

Presently Agatha began talking easily on casual subjects, not seeming to notice Bethesda's silence. Her conversation was always interesting, and generally witty and merry; but there was not a sentence she uttered, no matter how light, which did not convey to a ready mind some result of penetration or trait of character, or give one an idea as a clue to the problems which abound in life. She studied every one she met, knowing human nature too well to 'classify' individuals—that odious habit which is born of ignorance and breeds all manner of misunderstandings—and thus had been developed in her a discriminating love of humanity which constantly tended towards a wise development of those around her, and especially of reason and true freedom.

Bethesda found herself often shrinking involuntarily from remarks which made gashes in her past, to let the light of truth shine through ; but there also came an invigoration and strength such as is gained from bitter tonics, which makes one willing to drink deep for the health gained. And there was no dear disease to which Bethesda Hamilton clung when she recognised it as such. The only thing necessary to renouncement was to convince her that what she felt was disease, and this was often hard to do.

She was being subjected now, however, to a new alchemy, and the nights were the only time when she found herself, as it were, and fused the different metals of her past and present together. It would have been difficult to accomplish this except for the ardent and ceaseless flame of her devotion to René. The fidelity of her nature to one who had been acknowledged supreme to her was as a golden chain on which her life's incidental beads were strung to make—yes, it should be so—a rosary.

Lying in her berth with the window-curtain drawn back, and all dark and silent in the car, she seemed to herself like a shadow fleeing through space and gazing down on her future life. It was glorious moonlight, and the prairies now spread about her with the same long lines as had done the sea. The wide grassy billows undulating away to the horizon, where rarely a tree disturbed its low line ; occasionally a pond covered with water-lilies, the white blossoms like stars, amid which the moon reflected itself in the still depths ; and over and around all that air which to one new from Europe seems to allow no illusion of atmosphere to heighten effect, but shows abruptly each object, even in the moonlight, and makes one realise constantly that one is in a different land.

‘ And it is different,’ thought Bethesda, with the earnestness of resolve. ‘ My life now will be like these prairies ; monotonous, yet not petty, from the very extent of their monotony ; rolling

in grass and flower-covered curves to the unseen distance, with an atmosphere granting no enchantment, only clear following of one's path of duty; and above—may they always be reflected among the lilies!—a pure ambition, and the sky.'

The moon crossed the cloudless heavens, while the fleeting scene repeated itself for mile after mile. It shone on Bethesda with a white radiance, and she welcomed it with a smile. It was the same moon which, as a crescent, she had pointed out to René. She thought of what she had told him he might remember, and that now its whole surface was resplendent in the light of the sun.

In the morning they reached S——. Raleigh Stanhope was at the station to meet them, and welcomed them with hearty cordiality. The carriage was waiting, and Marcot climbed to the driver's seat, while Mr. Stanhope stood a moment at the door with uncovered head, and the upright, manly attitude Bethesda had always admired.

‘I can’t go home with you,’ he was saying, ‘but Agatha will take better care of you than I could, and will make you welcome to our house for as long as we can prevail upon you to stay. Good morning, ladies. Home, Jessup.’

He waited on the curbstone until they had rolled off. ‘What hungry eyes that girl has!’ he said to himself, as he turned and walked towards his office. He was usually on the alert when in town, but to-day two or three acquaintances passed him without recognition. ‘She has come to the right place for food; my wife will give it to her,’ he finally soliloquised, and with this confidence let the haunting face slip from his mind, and soon was engrossed in affairs.

The home to which the wanderers were welcomed was a beautiful house, situated on the best corner of a fashionable street. One could always be sure that whatever Raleigh Stanhope possessed was excellent. It was a double house, planned by Agatha, with spacious rooms and few

stairs, and the large hall, shadowy, with a stained-glass window at the division of the staircase, was its *chef d'œuvre*. There were a few fine pictures and statues against a chocolate-coloured wall, and the wood-work was handsomely carved. Nothing about the house was common. The ornaments were elegant and of pronounced value, but never showy; while each apartment presented an aspect distinctively handsome and stately. Mrs. Trescott thought it a little cold and stiff; but Bethesda delighted in the house, and found it eminently characteristic of its owners. One could see at a glance that money or treasure of any kind was a means, not an end, in this household, and that an intelligent generosity held the purse-strings.

‘It is all so beautiful and solidly restful!’ exclaimed Bethesda, her weariness forgotten, as her spirit often did ignore the cries of her body. ‘It is just like you, Aunt Agatha,’ and she went to lay her cheek against Mrs. Stanhope’s shoulder with a momentary caress.

‘How much you two are alike,’ said Margaret; ‘aren’t they, Aunt Mabel? I never noticed it before.’

The resemblance was indeed quite marked. Mrs. Stanhope was somewhat taller than Bethesda, and the slender grace of the one had developed into a noble maturity in the other; but the long, fine lines of each were alike, and the colouring similar. Agatha’s hair was a darker shade of Bethesda’s; her eyes a clear blue, not large, but extraordinarily searching, and capable of great tenderness. But the loveliest feature of her face was her mouth. It was well shaped by nature, and the lips were pink as an oleander blossom. No one noticed, however, these attributes in considering the complete beauty of expression that gave its supreme attraction. It was tender, sweet, chastened, resigned; it was cheerful, hopeful, dainty, devoted; it was expressive of a rounded development of character as rare as it is priceless, and as comforting as it

is inspiring. This it was that caused Bethesda to remark a little sadly :

‘There is no one I would more like to resemble, but I fear I never shall.’

‘Thank you, dear,’ said Agatha softly. ‘Now, shall we go upstairs?’

‘Aunt Mabel,’ exclaimed Bethesda a moment later, ‘I want you to notice how comfortable everything is. There is not a single article which is not of use, either in suggestion or action. That is what makes the house so perfect to my mind.’

‘It is not perfect yet,’ said Agatha, smiling at her niece’s enthusiasm. ‘There is still much to be done. When I have it quite perfect, of which there is no immediate danger, I shall wish to build again.’

‘That is a *bizarre* notion,’ exclaimed Mabel. ‘I am so different. The longer I live anywhere, and the better it suits me, the more devoted I become to it. I like even a chair and a window

that I am used to. But you never did have the love of place I have.'

'It is possible that one who judged from the facts might not agree with you,' remarked Agatha in her quiet way.

'Oh, it hasn't been *my* fault that I have been tossed around the world so. It has always been a sacrifice of myself to others. I should have had a home long ago if it had not been for these girls, especially Beth's health and studies. Oh!'—she broke off suddenly at the door of the apartment assigned to her—'what a *ravissante* room! And how Frenchy it is!'

Then, for the first time since her arrival, she turned and gave her sister a spontaneous kiss.

'Your trunks will be up soon, I suppose,' said Agatha, an amused twinkle in her eyes; 'but don't wait for them. Here are wrapper and slippers at your disposal. I am glad you like the room. You had better take a good rest. Come, girls.'

‘I’m coming too,’ cried Mabel. ‘I must see the rest of your pretty house now.’

Margaret’s room communicated with Agatha’s, and was the cosiest nook in the house. The harmony of colour and arrangement was perfect. Olive-green and sky-blue intermixed and interwove, until the chamber seemed like a mossy dell with the blue air of Italy seen through the interstices. There were numerous pictures on the painted walls, and the ceiling was frescoed with symbols of Margaret, in which the daisy and pearl predominated. As a frieze there was an inscription in old English letters of a sentence taken from one of the Alhambric halls:—

‘In this garden of delights I am an eye,
And the pupil thereof is indeed our Lord.’

The tears came to Bethesda’s eyes as she looked about and found herself in this pure refuge, where the air was sweet with noble aims. Her sister seemed very much like Saint Margaret to her then.

Mabel was in ecstasies.

‘Where did you ever find such ideas?’ she exclaimed again and again. ‘You are really a genius, Agatha. There is not another such room in the universe. How did you ever think of it all? *C’est cela qui m’étonne!* I don’t remember any such ideas in New England.’

‘It is ten years since I lived there,’ said Agatha quietly.

‘*Tant pis!*’ exclaimed Mabel, striking her forehead with a theatric gesture. ‘We are ten years older!’

‘We will grow old faster if we don’t sleep,’ said Agatha, somewhat drily. ‘The girls look very tired.’

‘That’s true, and I am simply *écrasée*,’ said the incorrigible Mabel, letting her arms fall with sudden lassitude. ‘*Andiamo.*’

As this third language was introduced there was a general laugh.

‘What have I done now?’ asked Mabel, with

wide, innocent eyes. ‘You are all laughing at me. What have I said so witty?’

‘No one would attempt to repeat you,’ said Agatha.

It was very warm weather, but a strong wind was blowing, and no one but Mabel minded the heat. Indeed Margaret and Bethesda felt warm days peculiarly luxurious, especially in a house such as this, where every comfort was at hand. Mrs. Trescott, however, complained loudly of ‘this atrocious American climate, always in extremes, and with heat like a furnace, not——’

‘A bath,’ as Agatha suggested when a comparison was wanting.

‘A bath indeed! Fie! Italy is the most delicious place in the world. The climate never takes you by surprise. If there is to be a change you are prepared gradually, and don’t have your ears boxed by these sudden antipodes of heat and cold.’

‘You have not experienced any such changes

yet, have you ?' asked Mr. Stanhope courteously, for they were now at dinner, and Mrs. Trescott was in the seat of the honoured guest.

'No,' said Mabel, with a quick shrug; 'our welcome has been warm in more ways than one.'

'You would like it to change ?' asked Raleigh, a flash in his keen eyes.

'Oh no ! quite on the contrary, I assure you,' exclaimed Mabel, covering her *faux pas* with voluminous compliments. 'You have greeted us with such delightful cordiality that we could not wish even the weather to change, if that would alter it. But I trust there is no such danger,' and she beamed upon him one of her most tropical smiles.

Raleigh bowed with a look of bewilderment which amused his wife and caused her to say :

'We find her almost as difficult to follow as she does the weather, don't we ? Would you recognise her, Raleigh ? Suppose you met her

accidentally, do you think you would immediately call her Mabel ?'

'The family resemblance is too strong for it ever to be obliterated,' he returned: 'but foreign life certainly has changed her.'

'Improvement, I hope ?' said Mabel coquettishly.

'No doubt,' was the prompt reply. 'Are not the changes of a fair woman always from good to better ?'

'*Ma foi !* You are quite a Frenchman, Raleigh. But I remember you always did have a pretty way of turning things.'

When this little tilt was over Mr. Stanhope felt authorised to give some of his attention to Bethesda, who sat at his left, and the manner in which he addressed her was, in spite of intention, more easy and solicitous. There was something touching to the strong, satisfied man in her hungry yet brave eyes. He seemed to look upon her as a frail vessel which a touch might

break, and yet which needed support. And she in turn admired him heartily.

The prevailing characteristics of his face were rectitude and warmth of feeling. His mind was active and deep ; alive to all the questions of the day, and probing beneath them to the principles that made them good or ill. Philosophy and political economy, finance and social duties, were equally familiar to him. He was one of those men one meets on rare occasions who seem to have every subject chambered in their brains, and each occupant alert. He was punctilious in regard to the observance of conventionalities, and stern, almost rigid, in his opinions on any point of honour or honesty. Otherwise he was very coaxable, and always generous. There were a dozen young men in town whom he had started in individual careers, and who were proud of being called ‘ Mr. Stanhope’s young men.’ A willing hand and a well-trained brain found a faithful friend in Raleigh Stanhope ; a shiftless, lazy fellow found sharp

words and, up to a certain point, an easy kindness of heart. But let integrity, in whatever form, be touched, and no man lives who was quicker to unsheathe the sword and deal trenchant blows than Raleigh Stanhope.

The unity which reigned between him and his wife, who could not be divided in thought any more than in deed, was remarkable and complete. The consummate tact and calm audacity with which she treated him were without rival, and her accurate perceptions often aided him through close places, 'which,' he was fond of saying, 'a man without such a wife would have been squeezed to death in.'

Now, as they sat on either side of their richly spread table, dispensing hospitality to their guests, entertaining and invigorating them at once, an occupation which seemed peculiarly suitable to both, Bethesda looked from one to the other with unconcealed admiration, and also a sigh, which was immediately smothered.

The conversation turned upon jokes which Mrs. Stanhope was constantly playing on her husband, who took so boyish an enjoyment in them that he would remind her of one story after another to be told at his expense. It was Mrs. Trescott's turn for amazement at this, and she turned astonished eyes from one to the other with a wonder which only added to the fun, as anecdote after anecdote was detailed about this man who was the only person in the world, she asseverated, of whom she was afraid.

When they ended the repast it was in a burst of merriment which made the contrast that followed the more effective. Off from the library was a wire-screened porch, where there were easy chairs and a swinging lamp turned down to a dim lustre. The delicious perfume of tea-roses, with which the garden was filled, came in soft gusts, like the passing of some sweet presence ; the stars shone through the clear air, far away and fine ; a branch over the trellis was blown

now and again to touch Bethesda's cheek, and it made her quiver with a thrill of memory too keen for pleasure, yet which she would not move to avoid.

The yearning, the intense longing of her whole being for René then, made it seem as if she could actually see her spirit leaving her, and cleaving the air as it flew swiftly to its bourne. Oh, to be for once, just once, at rest !

‘Beth, dear, are you cold?’ asked Margaret, touching her hand. It was burning. ‘I thought you must be cold, you shivered so,’ she added simply.

Bethesda roused herself at this, and talked with a deafening uproar in her ears which often made her obliged to strain her hearing to the utmost to be able to understand what persons said.

Presently Agatha excused herself, and a few moments later called Beth.

‘There is some wine for you,’ she said. ‘Are

the perfumes from the garden oppressive ? I see you are not feeling well.'

' Oh no ; the roses are delicious. I am only tired, I suppose.'

' Come with me, then, a while.'

They went into the study, where every draught was caught, and which was only lighted by the reflections of the street lamps. Mrs. Stanhope bade her niece lie down on a bamboo sofa, and then sat and fanned her, talking with gradually lengthening pauses between her words.

Silence at length prevailed. Bethesda's eyes were shut, and her hand rested on her aunt's knee with a clinging confidence. She would like, she was thinking, to be alone with Aunt Agatha and Margaret for a long, long time ;—that is, if she could without hurting any one. Possibly for Aunt Mabel too it would be best ; but, if not, she did not wish to be selfish. This half-hour was hers at least. She could lie here, soothed and rested by the silence, the sympathy,

and an occasional glance at Aunt Agatha's self-contained and chastened face. A willing renunciation, and thence peace, was what spoke so eloquently from these features. What would be her advice if she could see her niece's heart? Bethesda rose presently, restless with encroaching thoughts.

‘You are so good to me!’ she said fondly, as Agatha rose also to join the others.

‘You have liked it?’ asked Agatha, bending to kiss her. She always loved persons best when she could do most for them. And Bethesda did not answer except by a touch.

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